

Wind of Change

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The story continues from the special episode of Kill La Kill. Follow Ryūko and Satsuki in their search for contentment and happiness in life. Will they find a way to start over, despite their unfortunate first encounter? Or will their doubts, uncertainties and misinterpretations keep them from doing so? Sisterly fic. Slight AU.

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Wind of Change

[Introduction](#)

[Prologue](#)

[The Invitation Letter](#)

[The Grand-Reopening](#)

[First Conversations](#)

[Misconceptions](#)

[In All Honesty Part 1](#)

[In All Honesty Part 2](#)

[Walking On Eggshells](#)

[Birthday Revelations Part 1](#)

[Birthday Revelations Part 2](#)

[Phone Call Consolation](#)

[Returning the Favour](#)

[A Peculiar Arrangement](#)

[In Your Care](#)

[Lingering Ties](#)

[In Too Deep](#)

[Encouraging Words](#)

[Alone Together Part 1](#)

[Alone Together Part 2](#)

[Home Again](#)

[How To Proceed](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Prologue

Prologue

A/N:

There it is, my very first fanfiction ever. I thought it was time for some sisterly Ryuko/Satsuki fluff, since this fandom has way too few platonic Ryuko/Satsuki fics. The idea is that it will consist of multiple chapters, so I'll try to keep updating as regularly as possible! Nothing is more frustrating than an unfinished story, is my experience ;)

English is not my speaking language, so please be gentle with any possible grammar mistakes. However, feedback is always welcome! Also, I do not own anything, except for my own creativity.

At the very last, the sole remaining supporter of Kiryūin Ragyō had been defeated. No more urges for revenge, no more plans to destroy the world, especially not by means of overtaking the global fashion industry. No threatening antagonists to destroy what is left.

The very idea of having a completely insane madwoman threatening your home, your friends and your family is undoubtedly tiring. Having lived with this monster since forever must have been utterly exhausting. And exhausted she was. Anyone who had been looking at Satsuki during the grand graduation ceremony could see the dark circles lingering just below her eyes.

However, her attitude was everything except one of extreme fatigue. Proudly content she stood on one of the boats sailing towards a mesmerizing sunset. Behind her, the source of destruction up until moments ago, Hōōmaru Rei. Beside her, the symbol of long-lasting friendship and loyalty, Nonon Jakuzure. Both the former and latter companies shared a look of disbelief when Satsuki suddenly took the sword in her hand, only to forcefully cut through her long locks.

Then, the person in question lets the strands of hair flow through her fingers, while a strong gust of wind carries them far into the distance.

Meanwhile, Ryūko and Mako shared a spot on top of their shabby-looking home. The house barely fitted onto the wobbly truck of the Mankanshoku family, but it was enough to incomprehensibly move forward. They were off to somewhere safe, to a place where they could start rebuilding their lives again. Ryūko sighs, her head leaning heavily onto her right palm. "Ryūko-chan" Mako whispered questioningly. "Are you sure you don't want to stay with Satsuki? I mean, we love to have you around, but she is your only family left."

For a moment, Ryūko looked surprised. Never would she have expected Mako to be seriously concerned about her non-existing relationship with Satsuki. Nevertheless, Mako can do the strangest things without anyone questioning. It seems to run in the family, that is something Ryūko learned early on. "Mako, I'll never forget Satsuki, don't worry."

The dark blue-haired girl leaned backwards, her eyes darting towards the sky. "Honestly, I don't know how to deal with her. Also, my mo-, screw that, THAT bitch of a Ragyō as well. It's all so surreal, so sudden... I cannot wrap my head around it. And then Senketsu..."

Before any possible waterworks could escape from her eyes, Ryūko felt a reassuring hand covering her own. She then shot her eyes to the girl next to her. Blue irises met brown ones, which are now rapidly filling up with unshed tears. "Ryūko-chan..." A soft voice spoke to her. "I understand, you must be very sad Ryūko-chan. But you can stay with us forever, and you can eat croquettes with our family. That's for sure! We all think of you as a part of our family... Papa, Mama, Matarō and Guts, we all do. Don't you ever forget that, Ryuko-chaaaan!"

Suddenly, the sound similar to that of a wailing toddler fills the quiet air. While consoling the sobbing mess that is called Mako, Ryūko drifts off to her own thoughts.

In the middle of a war, it turns out my enemy is my fucking sister. The mother that I've just discovered is alive, oh-so dashingly well and wealthy commits suicide right in front of my eyes, upon confronting me with a shit-load of disturbing truths about myself... and then my only source of comfort and safety just burns.

It stings. I don't know what to feel. Mako doesn't understand, she cannot possibly understand, even though she tries her hardest to. It just stings. But most of all, I don't know how to go on. How will I travel further down this path, in this life, when I am only left with a painful numbness?

Satsuki's gaze lingers to the shore, where a wiggly spot reveals the truck-shack combination of the Mankanshoku family. She then lets sigh escape from her tense lips. The memory of a seemly happy Ryūko repeats itself over and over again in her head. Her newfound little sister had found a loving family before joining the whole circus of defeating their mother together. Ryūko was perfectly happy with Mako Mankanshoku, Mako's parents, little brother and the tiny pet-creature.

Never in the million years could Satsuki reach out to Ryūko first, especially when she tried to kill her before. *How do I proceed? What do I do now, when everything I have been fighting for is settled? And even more important, what do I do with Ryūko, now that I've learned that our connection runs deeper than I've anticipated?*

The Invitation Letter

Chapter 1 - Invitation letter

A/N:

Here's the first chapter!

Ryūko's POV:

The days went by, quite uneventfully. Hours turned into days, and days turned into weeks. It just does not matter much to me: I breath, eat, sleep, listen to the incoherent babbling of Mako and repeat the whole routine after the clock starts its new cycle. While the other members of the Mankanshoku family rejoiced, intensely but shortly, and then just as quickly adjusted to their incomprehensible lifestyle, I was stuck. Stuck in the past, my thoughts continuously wandering to the events that took place a couple of weeks ago. *Being abnormal sucks. Being me, Ryūko Matoi, sucks.*

I miss Senketsu a lot. *Yeah, a hell lot*. Luckily, Mako and her family have been taking good care of me, showering me with their love, *weird antics* and friendliness. Slowly, I am starting to look forward.

Together with Mako, naturally, I am planning to attend some random high school again. Not completely out of free will, *hell no*, as Sukuyo-san and Bazarō-san have been pushing us to finish our basic education. At least until we are eighteen. Then again, somewhere around that time we will probably graduate, and then I am free to go and do whatever I want. *Not that I know what to do when that time comes. For now, attending a school without any problems sounds more appealing to me.*

Again, it turned out to be an uneventful morning. As I am munching on my sandwich, Mako is still snoring loudly, half-covered under a

thick blanket. Nothing out of the ordinary. Sukuyo-san is cleaning, Bazaro-san is half-heartedly dealing with a stack of complaint papers, and Matarō is off somewhere with his shitty gang of brats.

A shuddering noise reaches my ears and I shift my eyes towards the sudden sound. Just as the clattering quiets down, I see two envelopes hitting the doormat with a soft thud. *Weird, the delivery guy already dropped by half an hour ago.* Stuffing the last quarter of my breakfast into my mouth, I stand up and walk to the freshly delivered mail.

I see that my and Mako's names are scribbled down. *For me? Who the hell knows I'm living here?* Curiously, I rip open the paper envelope that is addressed to me, while putting Mako's onto the kitchen table. *What could it be?* As I take the letter out of the envelope, I hear Mako mumbling a string of words. She probably heard me getting the mail, and decided to give some kind of reaction. I cannot make anything out of her sleep-drunk nonsense, though. Upon turning my head towards the half-sleeping girl, the mumbling had quickly turned into the previous violent snoring. *Typical.*

As I turn my attention back to the paper that had been neatly sitting in the palm of my hand during my swift investigation, I recognize the logo of Honnōji Academy. *I thought that freakishly corrupt school had turned into ashes and dust weeks ago. Guess what, luck is not on my side again. And what do they even want with me... I was only used as a tool, as an undying source of destruct-*

My eyes widen as I read the first words of the damned paper. "Letter of acceptance to Honnōji Academy: Ryūko Matoi." *What the hell?*

Satsuki's POV:

Finally. After investing all of my available time into rebuilding Honnōji Academy, it was time to take off this new project of mine. The

reorganization within the Kiryūin agglomerate will be a rigorous task, however, a desperately needed one.

First and foremost, all corrupt pesticides that have been swarming around our core business, REVOCS, will be disposed of. As it now all falls under my responsibility, I want to start from scratch and begin building the foundation from the bottom up. Towards a better image, and aiming for a healthier working environment. *In order to make up for all the destruction I've caused, I must. It's my fault people had to start their lives anew. It's my fault people were living miserably and were taught that wrong ideals are a way of living. I have to make up for it, especially since only I have the means to do so.*

Next week, Honnōji Academy will have its grand re-opening. All previously attending students have been invited to pick up their education again, among other promotional events to boost the school's credibility, of course. Personally, I am a bit sceptic. *Not that I would admit that to others.* Inevitably, it will take lots of persuasion and effort to reach the same amount of students as before the whole crisis. *That is for sure.* Nevertheless, I believe that Honnōji Academy will be the first drastic step towards clearing the Kiryūin name. *And of the tyrant called Satsuki Kiryūin.*

The evening had turned into night without me noticing, seeing that the much-needed sunlight shines no longer. While I was organizing a bunch of files a few hours ago, I politely sent Soroi home. Currently, me being the only soul left in the company building, I am checking the last preparations for the countless business meetings that are planned for tomorrow.

I wonder what Ryūko is doing at the moment. Probably, hopefully, asleep at Mankanshoku's place.

My pen is flying over the documents. My fingers are cold, my eyelids heavy. Tomorrow will be a busy day as well: a minute-to-minute schedule closely packed with work-related responsibilities. A quick peek at the clock tells me it is past 01:00 AM. With more force than should have been necessary I shift my attention again to the

paperwork that it littered all over my workspace. *Almost done. Almost finished.*

And that was how she was found the next morning by none other than her faithful butler. Her face unfashionably planted onto one of the financial reports, her pen still clustered between her fingers. An unwashed porcelain cup still on her bureau.

Satsuki mentally reprimanded herself. Even in front of Soroi, she was always keen on keeping her strong and powerful aura. Well, that failed. Completely. It was fortunate Soroi was the one that discovered her embarrassing state before someone else did. Otherwise, her reputation of being a cold and strong-willed woman would have been gone for good. And that is something Satsuki would prevent at all costs. Because Satsuki is supposed to be strong.

"Ryūko-chan, what are you looking at?" Silence. "Ryūko-chan?"

Still no answer was given by the dark-blue haired girl sitting next to her. Annoyed by the fact that she could not see the content of the letter Ryūko was staring at, Mako decided to shift a few decimeters in order to lean forward. "Earth to Ryūko-chan..." A sigh.

"RYUUUUUKOOOO-CHAN, YOU ALIVE?"

Suddenly, a palm was shoved in the brunette's face. The force of the blocking arm was readily pushing Mako to the side, earning a protest from the girl. However, the spoken words were muffled by the hand covering her face, reducing it to whiny sounds.

"Jeez, Mako! Not now! Can't you see I'm busy?"

After she shot the girl a murderous look, Ryūko's resolve faltered immediately upon seeing tears appearing in Mako's eyes.

Frustrated, she threw the letter someplace within a few meters' radius. Ryūko then roamed through her untamed locks.

"Mako, don't cry... I-I'm sorry, I-"

A pair of arms engulfed Ryūko, as her face was buried into the other girl's shoulder. After the hiccups of her friend died down, her restrained thoughts took surface as she rambled in Mako's shirt.

"You know, Mako.... I have seriously no idea what Satsuki's thinking. First, she used that creepy school to start a war with that bitch, and now she wants to re-open that pit of hell all over again!"

"I think that your sis-"

"And then she decided that she should ALL invite us for that damned place! By sending a fucking letter! I mean, does she expect us to happily say yes, or what? Hell no! She... she just... and I thought she would be more eager to contact me personally, since... well-"
Ryūko hands balled up into fists, angrily settled on each side. At that moment, Mako shifted slightly, so that she could look in the blue irises of her roommate. She stares for a while, thinking about Ryūko's sudden confession, before whispering:

"Because she is your sis-"

"Goddammit Mako, I don't know anymore! I mean, shouldn't she be doing other things? Why that school again? Why that freakin' fucked-up company again? It's all so fucked-up! What's more, she is STILL acting so stuck-up while in reality- "

"You are worried about her, aren't you, Ryūko-chan?"

A look of surprise flashed in Ryūko's eyes, followed by some sort of disgust. She uttered loudly:

"Where did you get that idea from? I am not -"

As if it was the normal way of conversing, Mako interrupted Ryūko's fierce retort. "I know you are, Ryūko-chan. Don't you dare lie to me, or to yourself. You can also go check up on her, you know?"

"You wanna go to that school again, Mako? 'Cause it sure sounds like that. No way I'm going with you."

The psychological tension caused the two to separate from their embrace. Being the stubborn girl she is, Ryūko crossed her arms and huffed while blowing the prominent red streak of hair upwards. A few moments of dead silence passed by. Neither girl showed a sign of backing off.

"What do YOU want, Ryūko-chan?"

The few moments of silence that followed concerned Mako greatly. The poker face the dark-haired girl had on was unnerving. Seemly out of the blue, a sigh of frustration came from Ryūko's direction. Her eyes narrowed.

"I don't know."

The Grand-Reopening

Chapter 2 - The Grand Re-Opening

A/N:

First of all, thanks for the comments! I am glad to know people are enjoying this fic, and it motivates me to continue writing this story till the end... whenever this will be :).

To K2-Black-Panther: I'm not sure what that request of you will be, but suggestions are always welcome!

Anyway, here is the second chapter. Enjoy!

After her confrontation with the headstrong Mako, Ryūko's own stubborn opinion on the matter was effortlessly pushed aside by Sukuyo and Bazaro. Upon overhearing their conversation, Mako's parents decided to mingle themselves in their private discussion by giving them a piece of their mind. Which meant subtly broaching the subject of attending Honnōji Academy again. Which also meant stressing the fact that they would oh-so LOVE to see them continue their education at school nearby. And Honnōji Academy just happens to be the only high school in the whole vicinity that would gratefully accept these two problematic students.

Unfortunately, Ryūko had no argument to bring into this discussion, if it could be called a discussion at all. The announcement was made: they were to attend Honnōji Academy. In a few days the grand re-opening was scheduled, and so the two roommates were preparing themselves for the big event. Since all school supplies had mysteriously vanished during their hasty retreat and dramatic migration to the other side of town, a set of new bags, books and all sorts of writing tools had to be purchased once more.

Not that I used any of these. Ryūko's hand was languidly travelling over the various school items in the local bookstore, as she strode the store in a steady pace, carelessly looking at the supplies before dumping the necessary stuff in the shopping basket. Mako, on the other hand, bounced through the building, her eyes widening at every cute-looking pencil or weird-looking notebook.

"Ryūko-chan, Ryūko-chan, look over here! Oh My Goodie, they have ADORABLY CUTE LITTLE pens with doggy ears! You want one too, Ryūko-chan? They only have two left!"

The blue-haired girl glanced over her shoulder into the direction of the high-pitched exclamation. *Ew, that is definitely the most disgusting thing I've ever seen in my life. Way too cute, and way too ugly.* Inwardly, Ryūko cringed for a second. "Nah, Mako, you can have the whole bunch. I-"

The brute force of a flying person almost knocked the speaking girl down, in spite of her superhuman strength. During the flight of the overexcited girl, several books hit the ground with audible thuds. The resulting bear-hug lasted a short while, after which the tiny ball of positive energy just jumped up and down repeatedly in front of her. *Almost exactly like an elementary schoolkid. Typical.* "THANK YOU, RYUUKOOO-CHAN!" The decibels flew across the narrowly stationed shelves, and the volume rose to unbearable heights.

Quickly, Ryūko took action, before the other girl could embarrass herself any further with her childish behaviour. Grabbing Mako by the arm, she threw the two doggy-eared objects in the basket. Then, with a determined expression plastered on her face, she dragged her roommate to the counter, payed for the supplies and kept hauling the girl until the familiar neon letters of Bazaro's shady medical practice came into sight.

Finally back home, the two exhausted girls slump simultaneously against the cushions on the coach. Their coats are draped on the kitchen chairs, their school supplies neatly settled on the

accompanying table. Mako sighs. The clock ticks regularly, filling the silent air quite peacefully.

"So, this is it, huh? Tomorrow is the big day."

"Yeah."

"You nervous Ryūko-chan?"

Ryūko ponders for a moment. *Was she?*

"Not sure. You?"

A sudden movement on her right side startles the bluenette.

"I am REALLY excited, Ryūko-chan! I can use my new cutie-pie pens, I can take mama's croquettes with me for lunch, and I don't have to worry about finding my way to school. I know the way already, which is REALLY handy, and I have you as a back-up plan!"

"Suppose that's true, you have me as a back-up."

A poke in her right side. "Hey, that's not fair, Ryūko-chan! You can rely on me as well."

Thinking about the countless moments Mako interfered in a battle, forcing a victory with her ridiculous speeches, Ryūko snorted. The brunette looks up curiously.

"Suppose that's also true."

"..."

"..."

"You know, Ryūko-chan, I am also looking forward to seeing Satsuki-sama again. I wonder how she's doing after these hectic couple of weeks."

Her curious look turned into something more expectant and strangely knowing. Defeatedly, Ryūko lets out a breath she didn't know she was holding.

"Me too."

For Satsuki, the ear-piercing sound of the alarm clock came way too soon. While still positioned face down in bed, her right arm searched for the off-switch on the screaming device. After succeeding her desperate efforts to still it, shaking legs found their way to the carpet. Her toes touched the soft fabric as she steadied herself to sit on the bedside.

With some ruffling in her wild locks, the straightness was somehow regaining terrain in her previously chaotic bedhead. Her much shorter hair cascades down on both sides of her contracted face. It takes a while for the fierce woman to calm her breathing. *Just when you think all problems are solved, the nightmares come to torture you all over again. Forcing me to stay in the past, of my time with that excuse of a mother.*

She clenches her teeth, curls her toes, all while gripping the blanket with an increasing force. One full of desperation. The curtains are already open. *Since I cannot fall sleep in complete darkness. Pathetic. When will you stop acting like a scared little girl?* Today is the big day. All things are set, and although her night rest had not been fantastic, Satsuki feels more awake than ever. The grand re-opening of Honnōji Academy is about to start in a few hours, and that reality evaporates the nightly terrors from her trains of thoughts. Party because, to her surprise, a great number of applications were sent to the Administration Office. And a few days earlier, Satsuki caught wind of two very familiar applicants.

Mako Mankanshoku and Ryūko Matoi. Never would she have expected the two to even bother continuing high school. That, however, does not stop Satsuki from being overjoyed at the prospect of seeing her little sister again.

"I wonder how you've been holding yourself, Ryūko." she whispers to no one in particular.

A massive stream of similarly dressed youngsters takes the two students to the renovated building branded as Honnōji Academy. Although the old site was used to construct the new school, the atmosphere and design took a complete 180 degrees turn. Whereas the previous block of cement and iron felt like a prison, this high school expresses the absolute opposite. *Yeah, this is how a 'normal' high school should look like. I guess.*

"WOWIE, Ryūko-chan! This place looks SOOO different from the old school! The new teachers and students look a lot friendlier now! Happy people make other people happy too, right, Ryūko-chan?" The brown-eyed-girl practically skipped from one place to the other as to take in all new changes. Ryūko lips curled up in a smile by the sight of her friend's overenthusiasm. *So contagious, really.* "Totally agree on that, Mako."

And to be honest, Ryūko couldn't believe her eyes as well. *Satsuki must have put a lot of effort in this.* As if the iron castle of revenge still existed, the girl's blue irises darted upwards. However, this time, no blinding tower stands in the way of her sight. Out of habit, she puts her hands in the pockets of her jacket.

At the same time, a crowd started forming around a contemporary stage in the middle of the school's property. Going with the flow seemed to be the only option as Mako and Ryūko were gradually being pushed towards a much denser spot. With a few hundred students packed together on such a small area, it became more and more difficult to take glimpses at the happenings on-stage. Impatient teenagers began murmuring and pushing, raising the tension within the group.

Eventually, the recognizable voice of Satsuki silenced the students. Her dominant and harsh tone of speaking still had the same effect on throngs of people, but now a tiny hint of friendliness could be

detected in her words as well. The speech was perfect, exactly like what was expected of Satsuki Kiryūin.

The message of her speech was clear. Honnōji Academy started another chapter of its existence, leaving the past behind by rebuilding from the bottom up. The only thing that will remain the same is its name. The staff and the operational system underwent a complete reorganization. A new building, tons of new students. And a positive view from the one directing it all.

To Ryūko, this was the least of her concern. Her claustrophobic tendencies took the upper hand as she struggled to gain more breathing space. She even began jumping at some point, until she decided to escape the closeness of the crowd.

Whispering her apologies and goodbyes to Mako, she slithered in-between the sea of people towards the side. There, in the shadows, Ryūko collapses against the greyish walls of the main school building. *Jeez, definitely too many people. Only if I were a bit taller, just like...*

Her head turned towards the sound of her sister's voice, who was carrying her speech like a true professional, amidst and above the intently listening public. Ryūko closed her eyes, engraving the words in her mind, although unable to hold any meaning to them at that moment. It was right then that she took notice of her own fatigue slowly washing over her body. *I was probably more on-edge this whole time than I thought. Today is already draining, and the classes haven't even started yet.*

Unconsciously, Ryūko relaxed more and more, until eventually, she fell asleep in the shadowy place that she claimed her 'hiding spot'. And while she slipped into slumberland, the speech neared its end, indicating the start of her new high school student life...

First Conversations

Chapter 3 - First Conversations

A/N:

I'm on a roll this week, so here's the third chapter.

To K2-Black-Panther: I think that request of yours is manageable. So, be patient, and who knows... perhaps in the next chapter already?

Satsuki's POV:

My right hand holds the microphone a little tighter as I am delivering the very much anticipated words of promise, of hope. Words dripping with determination. *Now I have to start believing in them as well.* At the same time I am looking at the crowns of hundreds of people who, from today on, will be attendees of a new Honnōji Academy.

So far, I am having no luck in spotting that dark-blue head of hair. *Satsuki, focus. You have a responsibility and a reputation to uphold.* The speech is nearing its end, and I am addressing the teenagers in high school uniforms once more.

"Hereby, I welcome you all to this brand new Honnōji Academy,..." My eyes shift towards the right side of the crowd, trying to find her.

"... and I wish you all a great and inspiring high school career full of happiness and safety."

Where could she be? By the end of my speech, I still have not been able to find the girl. I gave the microphone a slight squeeze before putting it back into its holder. An almost dejected feeling came over me as I went off-stage, dismissing the students to leave for their morning classes.

I didn't even hear the applause as I descended the stairs, continuing my way to the chairwoman's office. *Which is my office for the time being, until I find a worthy replacement. Worthy and capable of leading Honnōji Academy in a passionate and just way.*

"Satsuki-sama, Satsuki-sama! I'm SOOOOOO happy to see you again!"

In a flash, some brown-bobbed girl appeared before me. Standing on her forefeet, the tiny Mako Mankanshoku practically gleamed of happiness, smiling broadly and genuinely. *Still the same as ever.* Just as I am to politely excuse myself, as the situation does not allow me to waste time on each and every student, Mankanshoku puts her left arm in front of my escape route, effectively blocking my path.

"Are you looking for Ryūko-chan? 'Cuz I saw you secretly searching for her during your pretty-sounding speech, Satsuki-sama."

I nod reluctantly, hesitantly. *Just as I thought, she indeed is a perspective young girl. Ryūko is lucky to have her as a friend, and as a family.*

It seems I was a bit too obvious in my search for the one person I've longed to see. I quickly push this thought aside, since it already happened and can no longer be prevented. Then, another thought occurred to me. *Maybe, just maybe, this girl knows why Ryūko was absent at the opening ceremony. If anyone would know my little sister's whereabouts, it would be her.* Just one second short of sharing my question with Mankanshoku, she tiptoed towards me, and whispered in my ear.

"Ryūko-chan said that she didn't like the pushing and pulling of the crowd, so she went looking for a quieter place to watch the speech. She can't really deal with tiny spaces, y'know."

"..."

Wait a minute, she has claustrophobia? It turns out I know nothing about her at all. Great job, Satsuki. You already suck at being a sister. You are truly clueless.

"That's why, Satsuki-sama, she should be somewhere around here, I think. If you see her, can you tell her I'm going inside? THANK YOU!"

Before I could even utter a word of protest, she was gone. A cloud of dust trailing behind her as she ran to the central entrance to the building. I sigh. *Still the same as ever. Typical.*

I resume my way to the building. However, now slightly going off-course. Off to search for her.

Thank you, Mankanshoku.

The cool breeze makes Ryūko shiver unconsciously. The morning sun climbs upwards, illuminating and warming her locks, while she still sleeps soundly against the brick wall. She did not notice the crowd dispersing into smalls flocks, all searching for the right classrooms to start their first lesson of the day. She did not notice the tornado called Mako Mankanshoku speeding past her to prevent being late again.

She also did not notice the figure of Satsuki Kiryūin looming over her, that is, until a few moments later. Slowly, the younger girl's eyelids fluttered, while making small movements to indicate her transition to a waking state. Then suddenly, she opened her eyes and sat upright in a fluid motion.

"Wha-"

"I hope the content of my speech wasn't that sleep-inducing, student?"

A hint of sarcasm coated the words that came out of Satsuki's mouth. Ryūko's eyes flew to the speaking girl who towered over her.

"Satsuki... what are you doing here?" *Jeez, you scared the hell outta me.*

Ryūko grins at the girl, surprised, albeit a bit sheepishly. With her left hand, she runs through her messed up locks that had flattened during her quick nap. Her blue irises twinkle softly in the morning sun.

"Just taking a stroll on the school's property, checking if everyone is able to find their way to the lectures. And you, Ryūko, what are you doing here, sleeping during my speech in broad daylight?"

"No offence, I was just needing a bit of sleep. Couldn't sleep a wink last night."

It is good to see you being so carefree, little sister. So unlike me. The elder of the two crosses her arms and gives the still squatting girl a grin to match. Cocking one of her prominent eyebrows.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, and the crowd was being pushy as hell. I just want some breathing space, y'know? So I escaped the tin of sardines and came to this nice resting spot."

Triumphantly, Ryūko sticks her nose in the air, giving the other a sideway glance. She wipes off the debris from her right hand and stands up. The top of her head reaches Satsuki's eyes, and as the younger of the two lifts her head, blue eyes meet blue eyes.

Hours seem to pass by in this wordless exchange. And although no words were spoken, facial expressions were carefully read while both tried to decipher each other the hidden messages underneath it. This, even for the two level-headed sisters, turned out to be an impossible task.

"..." *How are you doing, Ryūko?*

"..." *How are you doing, Satsuki?*

Eventually, the arm-crossing sister took over reign of the conversation, slightly coughing before voicing the much-dreaded words of denial. As if her head emptied itself beforehand, she said:

"As much as I would like to catch up with you, I have quite some meetings to attend in a short while, for which I have to prepare. And I believe you should be heading for your class as well, Ryūko."

Stupid, stupid. Why would you say that? You will always be able to make time for your little sister. Because she is your only family left. You are really clueless, Satsuki.

"I guess so. Then, I won't be holding you from your precious worktime anymore, Satsuki."

Ouch, that sounded too harsh. I mean, I know Satsuki is freaking busy. But it is also kinda frustrating to be put into second place all the time.

"..." Satsuki's eyes widen, her body visibly stiffening. Ryūko naturally notices, who, on her account, starts to blush from shame and guilt. *Yep, instant regret. Shouldn't have said that.*

"I mean-" She is cut off forcibly by the other girl. Her voice, audibly strangled now, intervenes.

"It's okay, Ryūko. You should be off to your class now, and if I'm not mistaken, you should be in classroom 2-1."

Wait, what? How does she know whe-

"I really hope to speak to you soon, Ryūko. Bye."

Satsuki swallows thickly, giving the smaller girl an earnest look one last time. Both of her hands clenched into fists, shortly focusing her cropped-up tension. Her nails are digging into her flesh. She then relaxes her hands, sighs deeply, and turns around elegantly.

She sped up during that unplanned escape, not wanting to rethink her decisions. Satsuki could not handle her inner turmoil at the moment, and she needed to let this conversation sink in. The choices she had made were not wise, but reluctant and way too passive.

Almost exactly the opposite of what she's feeling inside. *A swirling storm of twisted desperation and longing. Along with memories I truly wish to forget.*

Ryūko saw the back of her sister gradually disappearing behind the school building. The feeling of guilt rapidly took over the drowsiness of her sleep-drunk state. *Great way to start off, Ryūko.*

She was incredibly unfamiliar with the open display of emotions from the older girl. *I'm so confused. Don't give me this crap, Kiryūin.* Her sarcasm, her teasing, the glint in her eyes, but also her strained and hoarse voice: it was all new to Ryūko. She liked her straightforwardness, not this indirect back-and-forth signalling.

Suddenly, an ear-piercing sound shook the daydreaming girl from her thoughts. *Shit, I'm gonna be late.* With no time to waste, she picked her bag from the grassy underground next to her and started sprinting towards the entrance. Because her inhuman powers still reside within her small frame, she could sit in place and on time before the bell stopped its regular song-singing tune.

Leaning her chin onto her left palm, she stared out of the window, while the attendance list was checked on absent students. She sighs, her thoughts drifting back to her previous conversation.

Bye, Satsuki. I also hope to see you soon.

Satsuki's POV:

My desk is neatly organized again. After going through an enormous stack of papers and documents, while attending various meetings

once every hour, now was the time for a cup of hotly brewed tea.

"Thank you, Soroi, you may go."

As the butler closes the door behind him with a soft click, I reach for the damping beverage and bring the cup to my lips. I savour the deliciously calming aroma before taking a sip.

From over the tea cup I inspect my bureau, and in particular the calendar, that was promptly on display in the right upper corner of the mahogany desk. A red circle catches my attention and reminds me of that particular important date next week. Then my eyes shift to the photo next to the calendar, one of me and the Four Devas. And that certainly reminds me of the lunch meeting I have with Nonon in an hour.

I focus again on the red circle marking next Tuesday. *I definitely have to start preparing soon. It must be perfect.*

Misconceptions

Chapter 4: Misconceptions

A/N:

It took somewhat longer than expected, however, it did out to be a longer chapter as well. Well anyway, here's chapter four already (time flies) !

The chair stood on two legs as Ryūko leaned the object backwards, only to rest her upper body on Mako's desk lazily. The other girl smiled upon noticing her attempt to get her attention, and tapped her index finger on Ryūko's nose.

"Ugh, I can't believe I actually looked forward to being a 'normal' high-schooler again. It's been three hours and I am SOOO done with this crap."

To accentuate her disgust, she pointed at the scribblings on the blackboard, then redirecting her finger at the books that were littered all over her desk. The break started a few minutes ago, and several students decided to get some fresh air outside, leaving a handful in the room.

"Wow, Ryūko-chan, I didn't know you actually looked forward to this day... guess not anymore!" She poked the blue-haired girl on her forehead, earning a groan in response. "Anyway, I haven't slept this well in a Loooong time, Ryūko-chan!"

Mako, on her account, gestured towards the peculiar arrangement of her school supplies on her desk, perfectly suited for a nicely unnoticed nap. *Just like the first day I met Mako. Typical.*

Ryūko let out a long and dramatic grunt. The lessons were frustrating, as it reminded her of the fact she missed out on a lot in

her previous years. Being far from the picture-perfect 'excellent student', Ryūko had difficulties catching up as well. A long road full of hurdles was up ahead.

Also, other things were a growing source of frustration. Thinking about a particular conversation this morning, her head boiled over, feeling a mixture of emotions. Relief. Yes. Anger. *I guess.* Disappointment. *Yep.* Guilt. *Definitively.* Seeing the struggling girl continue brooding, Mako laid a hand on her left shoulder.

"Did you speak with Satsuki-sama pretty-perhaps, Ryūko-chan?"

"Uh... yeah."

"You don't sound that happy, Ryūko-chan. Did something happen?"

"No shit, Sherlock."

"Eh..."

"Satsuki's being her stuck-up self again. Busy as always."

Again, Ryūko felt all emotions coming back to her, the ones from this dreadful morning. Her face contorted slightly in exasperation, her fists balled and feet tapped obsessively against the poor legs of the chair, all in an attempt to calm herself down.

"But she's been looking for you, though."

The bluenette looks up in confusion. *This is so fucking random, Mako.*

"Who?"

"Satsuki-sama, silly. Who else?"

That's true, I don't know anyone here except Mako and the damned Kiryūin. Wait, what?

"You sure 'bout that, Mako? 'Cuz I am damn sure about her priorities, which do NOT include me."

"Then, Ryūko-chan, you must have not paid attention to Satsuki's speech", she deadpanned.

"Nah." She swung her feet back and forth rhythmically. "Took a nap at the side. It turned to be some crappy promises and high flying bullshit anyway."

Again, a poke on her forehead. "That's not what I meant, Ryūko-chan. Not her words, her EYES."

The bobbed girl enlarged her eyes even further to illustrate her words. They sparkled intently.

"What are you talk-"

"She was LOOKING for you, Ryūko-chan! With her EYES! All the time, during her speech, she was busy spitting through the faces of her public to find YOU, Ryūko-chan."

"That's bullshit... no fucking way."

"And then I saw Satsuki-sama on my way to the first lecture... she admitted it, Ryūko-chan. She was SEARCHING for her sister, so I told her you went somewhere quiet."

Great. "So, you were the one who sent Satsuki to me, huh? Explains a lot, though."

No, in fact, it doesn't explain a thing. Why did she act like a complete bitch back then, if she wanted to see me that much? What goes on in that head of yours, Kiryūin?

With a thud all four legs of the chair reached safer ground once again. The blue-haired girl stood, stretched the muscles in her body, relieving some of the cropped-up tension by moving around a bit. Mako watched the other girl's facial expression amusedly.

"Ne, Ryūko-chan, I think you shouldn't be too harsh on Satsuki-sama. She looked REALLY tired."

A glance towards the speaking girl. "I won't. Not anymore. Thanks, Mako."

Both girls smiled at each other, because at that time, they understood: the message came across. *Please give me a second chance, Satsuki. I'm just clueless.*

"How are you holding yourself these days, Nonon? Busy preparing for the upcoming concert?"

Satsuki and Nonon shared a spot at the window side of the cozy café, located just across the school. Both had a steaming cup of specially blended tea in front of them, feeling a sense of contentment at this amical conversation. Just catching up sometime during the lunch break, as their packed schedules left no room for loafing around. None at all. After all, a few weeks had passed before they were able to set a date for this friendly get-together.

"Just the usual. The preparations have been going excellent, which is to be expected with me as musical director." She flips her pink hair, giving a slight wink to indicate the hint of sarcasm.

Satsuki, on her account, quietly sips her tea. "Is that so? I'm glad to hear that. But honestly, I didn't expect anything less from one of my former Devas." She returns the wink.

"And you, Satsuki-sama? How are you doing?"

"All reorganizations and renovations have been going according to schedule so far. The grand re-opening of Honnōji Academy has just passed, which turned out to be more of a success than initially predicted. As for REVOCS-"

"What about the underachiever... I mean, Ryūko? Did you talk to her already?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Her fingers twitched slightly at the memory of earlier this day. *I screwed up.*

"You know, Satsuki-sama, I guess going slowly is sometimes a better approach. And I think you two shouldn't rush, I mean, it's not as if the both of you have a healthy view on how a 'family' should function. Taking baby steps is still a way of going forwards, don't you think?"

Satsuki sips her tea again, letting the words of her friend sink in. Nonon then looks her way.

"I guess so. Proceeding hastily would do more harm than good." *I know from experience. Today, I completely panicked, not knowing how to behave like a 'normal' sister.*

"True that, Satsuki-sama."

"Thank you, Nonon." *Guess I have to rethink my plans.*

Satsuki's POV:

Oh no, not again. I recognize that particular point of view as the bathhouse of the Kiryūin Mansion appears before my eyes. Stark naked, soaking in the Life Fiber-stimulating waters. The figure of my Mother standing before me, kneeling, smirking evilly, forcing me down in her way towards the ice cold pavements.

Her touches, the feeling of disgust. Trying to escape without revealing my thirst for revenge. My mind turning blank upon further assault from my seemly sole-remaining family. Having to accept - A shock ran through my entire body, causing it to jolt upwards immediately. I shudder. That same dream again. Does it ever stop, does it ever end? Will I ever be able to move on? I read the digits on

the alarm clock. 5AM. It is way too early, but way too late to sleep in peacefully.

In the end, I kept pondering and pondering until the first rays of sunlight pierced their way through the windowpane, hoping to lose a fraction of the inner demons that mercilessly pull me back to the depth called loneliness.

Ryūko's POV:

With mild reluctance I exit the classroom on my way to the sport fields. *Another period full of boring stuff.* Mako, on the other hand, is happily skipping next to me, a stark contrast with my sloughy way of walking. P.E. was and will never be my favourite subject. *None of this will ever be, to be honest. I was never meant to be a high schooler.*

My gaze lingers to the shiny cast floor that covered the hallway, my thoughts wandering my conversation with Mako during the lunch break. Satsuki had been looking for me all along. Satsuki did not have any time for me, but still, she went out of her way to see me.

That's just so weird, Satsuki.

Just then, I recognize that particular voice belonging to the person possessing my mind. *Satsuki.* Her determination is one in a million, her words coated with authority. I snap up my head towards the sound, almost eager to sneak a peek at the girl. *My sister.* I want to talk to her, but it seems her conservation is far more important. The serious look in her eyes betrays the nature of the words spoken. It seems as if she's sending out a clear message saying "do not disturb". And who am I to barge into their hallway meeting? *Exactly, nobody.* I don't think she would appreciate it as well. Being busy and all. The person she's talking to is probably someone high-up, judging from the suit wear and prestigious aura.

Yeah, I have no right to interrupt. Maybe some other day... maybe some other time. Either way, I have to talk to her soon, and kinda apologize for my slip-ups. When do you have time for me?

I continue my way to the P.E. class, my feet even more heavy than before. Mako practically drags me through the corridors, until I manage to set foot onto some sports field, on which I released my energy and frustration through an uncompetitive game of soccer.

Back at home, Ryūko throws her back to the nearest corner, sighing heavily upon entering. Her inability to initiate any contact with her sister is *damn* infuriating as she finds herself way out of her comfort zone, dealing with pent-up feelings and all.

Normally, she would turn to Senketsu for a good heart-to-heart. However, that time is long gone. *Yeah, I miss him a great deal.* Coming home today, the bluenette misses him even more than ever. Apart from the whole distracting REVOCS-business she had to take care of before, she rarely talked to anyone about her inner demons, her inner fears and feelings. It was always about saving the world, getting revenge or fighting for your life. With Senketsu, she did sometimes let her heart run free, and especially after today she could really use this source of consolation.

Why did you have to go, Senketsu?

"Welcome home, Ryūko-chan!" The motherly voice of Sukuyo rings from inside the kitchen area.

Quickly, Ryūko wipes her dry eyes, sniffing a bit. "Yeah, I'm home, Sukuyo-san."

It was more of a psychological gesture, as if she was about to dramatically bawl her eyes out. Instead, no tears streaked her face, and no visible sign of crying showed. On the inside, however, she felt utter loneliness from missing her best companion and buddy for life.

The floodgates had opened a long time ago, but the river ran dry over time.

The familiar sight of Sukuyo pops around the kitchen door, a concerned expression plastered on her face. "You alright, dear?"

The girl hums in response, in an attempt to sound convincing. The brown-haired woman would have none of that though. She rushes forward and towards the down-casted girl, and in a fluid motion she cups her cheeks affectionately.

"You know you can tell me anything, Ryūko-chan? By all means, you are welcome to drop all your problems with me, so we can have a nice mother-daughter chat about it, okay?"

Her hand slides to the girl's shoulder, squeezing it slightly while reading the gestures of the recipient. The blue-haired girl avoids eye contact, looking caught, and her facial expression looks somewhere between thoughtful, conflicted and frustrated. A sight escapes from her lips.

"I know, Sukuyo-san, I know. It's just all difficult to grasp, the things that keep happening to me. Before, I could turn -"

"Do you miss Senketsu, dear? I know you used to hang around that sailor uniform a lot, and talked to him. You know, I didn't understand him at all, but you did... and I just want you to know there are people you can lean on."

"..." A brief shudder rang though the girl's spine. No word was spoken to the kind-hearted woman.

"It's not good to keep those feelings inside, Ryūko-chan. Just know that I would do anything in my power to help you, give you advice and provide a welcome home."

It was then that Ryūko gave in to Sukuyo's worried questioning and started rambling. About her missing Senketsu, about the happening

of today, meeting Satsuki again. Her inner conflict, her numbness, loneliness and reluctance. With water-filled eyes, she entered the open arms of the woman, who did wonders by listening quietly to the girl's issues. She tended to her mental wounds, and made a beginning with healing them, giving the most wonderful advice:

"In order to reach out for Satsuki-sama, tackle your fears and be honest with yourself. Look into your heart before trying to explore hers."

In All Honesty Part 1

Chapter 5 - In All Honesty Part 1

A/N:

Again, thank you all so much for the (re)views, reads, likes and follows. As I'm enjoying the Spring Break the coming next days, I have a bit more time to spend on writing. Also, luckily, I have very few deadlines for my studies, so here's a quick fifth chapter!

The morning sun appears orange-ish with streaks of red colouring the clouds as the two roommates walk to school together. Their respective morning routine displays itself in the girls' behaviour. Whereas Ryūko shuffles her feet almost aggressively against the tiny pebbles on the dirt road, groaning and hands deeply settled into her leather jacket, Mako seems to float, lightly skipping with arms swinging back and forth in wide gestures, while a sandwich flaps up and down in-between her teeth. The blue-haired girl carries her bag over one shoulder quite lazily, while the brunette has hers tightly stuck to her back with both straps.

It is a mere 15 minute walk to Honnōji Academy, and so their sweet waking time passes in an instant. Halfway, the happy-go-lucky ball of energy turned towards the more grumpier girl, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"Ne, Ryūko-chan, what did you and mom talk about yesterday?"

"... you know... stuff." The bluenette mumbles under her breath, her mouth covered with the thick red scarf she is wearing loosely around her neck.

"No, I don't know stuff, Ryūko-chan." Suddenly, Mako sounds convincingly serious.

"..." Another pebble becomes the victim of a vicious kick, sending it linea recta towards the now bluer sky, travelling with an astonishing speed.

As if on cue, Mako was back to her usual cheery self. "Wait, wait, lemme guess... was it the new English teacher? The one that saw you drabbling in your notebook?"

"Nope." The 'p' popped on her lips. *Playing games, huh? So much energy this morning... poor me.*

"Ah, I know I KNOW! The girls that were afraid of you." Mako poses triumphantly, as if she has just made the most brilliant discovery ever.

"No news flash here."

"Dad's pervy photo collection?"

"No."

"Uhm... the cutie-pie pens that I bought last week?"

Ryūko shrugged, indicating that the answer was wrong once again.

"Was it about me?" The pair of puppy-eyes staring at her were tear-filled and pleading.

"No Mako, it was not about you." She reassured the degraded puppy with a sincere smile.

"Then, was it about Satsuki-sama?"

"Sort of."

"About Senketsu?"

"... sort of."

Silence momentarily filled the air, as neither of them spoke a word. However, you could see the gears turning in the girl's head. And then:

"BUT, RYUKO-CHAAAAN! YOU CAN ALSO COME TO ME FOR FRIENDSHIPPY ADVICE!"

A wide-eyed Mako pauses in front of the still slouching girl, legs spread and with arms wide open.

"That's what friends are for, right?... right?"

A hint of uncertainty was woven into those two sentences. However, dejection and disappointment clearly had the upper hand. Her arms deflated slightly with each passing second.

"... Ryūko-chan..."

Slow steps brought the now guilty bluenette to the bawling high schooler. Her right hand ruffled the short brown hair, which causes the sniffling bunch of misery to look upward. *Be honest, is what Sukuyo-san said. That's what I have to do, and that's what I'm gonna do.*

"I know now, Mako, I'm sorry... I didn't mean it like that. It's just... Senketsu and I always talked about this kind of stuff. And now that he isn't here anymore, I was not sure what to do."

The sniffing stopped abruptly. And then two short but insanely strong arms wrapped around Ryūko's torso. To her disgust, she felt warm tears wetting her shirt. *Ew.*

"Ryūko-chan, thanks for saying that. Ten thousand thank you's for being honest with me-e-e-eee."

For a couple of minutes, the two girls just stood there, one of them comforting the other by delicately rubbing her back. The blue-haired girl lifted her head to the sky, watching the clouds drift by. Softly, she

whispered: "And that's what I'm gonna do from now on, Mako. Be honest."

Soon, I have to apologize to Satsuki. I want to, desperately. The words slipped out before I was even thinking about the consequences. If I get the chance to see her, I will tell her. Honestly.

Satsuki's POV:

7 AM. It's been a few hours since I woke up. *I'm close to adjusting to this horrible daily schedule.* The nightly terrors came to haunt me again, waking me earlier than is considered healthy. *Someday, it will stop. Like always, I have to pull myself through this. It will stop, eventually.*

The time I'd been awake, I spent pondering once again. I'm thinking back to the lunch meeting with Nonon, during which I learned something valuable. That 'going slow and taking baby steps', as she worded it with accurate precision, is already a way of going forward. *And that's exactly the pace at which we have to move forward, in order to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings.*

I hope to see her soon. *Ryūko, my little sister.* Unfortunately, my responsibilities as chairwoman of REVOCs put constraints on my flexibility, with constantly having to commute between Honnōji Academy and the company building. The reorganizations are reaching the next phase of thorough internal investigations. It keeps me incredibly busy, but I have to do it, and make up for my past destructions. *It is my duty to provide a healthier working and studying environment. For all of us.* My thoughts wander back to Ryūko. When I see her, if I see her, I have to apologize for my behaviour of last time. *I was afraid of opening up and panicked. I'm just clueless.*

Students gather in the canteen as soon as the lunch break is initiated by the bell. Ryūko and Mako stood to the side, as they

amusedly watch the scene unfolding before them. The blue-haired girl slurps from her lemon juice, while Mako stuffs some incomprehensible croquettes in her mouth, imitating a collecting hamster on duty.

It becomes increasingly packed in the bread-selling area of the canteen, as most students prefer to buy their lunch cheaply while still enjoying a good taste of freshly baked buns. The poor saleswomen behind the counter are not able to handle the workload, it seems, as the line steadily grows. The situation reaches a climax when the cue extends to the hallway. Meanwhile, some youngsters are starting to get impatient, as their empty stomachs are acting up.

"Wowie, Ryūko-chan, it's really busy over there, don't ya think?"

Ryūko, on her account, hums in response, totally agreeing with the 'busy'-part. *I'm glad I don't have to get myself some bread today, because I would go nuts if I were in that line.*

Being merely bystanders in this whole ordeal, the two girls can only watch as the frustration and tension rise within the waiting group of students. They catch a glimpse of the vendors, who are nearing their wits end to fulfill each and everyone's requests. However, this commotion was nothing compared to the drama that would ensue when the following announcement was made:

"STUDENTS, FROM NOW ON, ALL BREADS AND BUNS ARE SOLD OUT FOR TODAY. MY DEAREST APOLOGIES FOR THE INCONVENIENCE."

Shouts of protest fill the canteen by dozens of students who ended up without lunch. People with multiple items were glared at, and some were even robbed of their purchase. Small fights broke out between those involved in the act of jealousy, with fist-exchanging and hair-pulling being a means of settling the war for bread and buns.

Squeezing out the last drop of lemon juice, Ryūko leaned forward to dunk the carton in the litter bin. With a soft thud the trash reaches its destination. She quickly overlooked the now dire situation. *Should I stop them? If anyone is able to put a hold onto this crap, it's definitely me. It will put me into some deep shit though, and I don't want any problems on the second day of school.*

"Ryūko-chan, shall I go stop them?"

"You?" A snort. "Mako, we both know your speeches do not work against a bunch of famished high schoolers. Period."

The two bickered for a while, mainly to compromise on what to do. It was at that moment that a strong-willed and powerful voice carried over the bustling crowd, silencing the fighting flocks that were spread here and there. Surprised, both girls turned towards the source of authority:

"Enough! All of you, report to your respective homeroom teachers this instant! For those of you who were not able to grab a lunch, a new stand with breads and buns will arrive in a minute."

When the hell did she arrange all of this?! How did she even know?

"Before you leave, I want to stress the fact that Honnōji Academy does not tolerate such groundless tussles. We have a zero tolerance policy regarding senseless violence, and violence in general. Therefore, all of you involved in this disgraceful incident will receive a suitable punishment from the homeroom teacher. Let this be a valuable lesson. You're dismissed."

Similar to a colony of ants, the students crisscrossed past one another, searching for the food stand or running towards the teachers' office. As for Mako and Ryūko, they sigh in relief. Their decision was placed in Satsuki's hands, who dealt with the situation quite formidably.

Satsuki . The blue-haired girl searches through the swarm of people for the one she planned to reach out for. However, no straight dark-blue head of hair was spotted among the slightly panicking mass of students. *Jeez, where did you go? I want to talk to you.*

"Ryūko?"

In a flash, said girl turned a full 180 degrees, surprise covering her facial expression. "Satsuki."

"Hi."

"... hi." A hesitant hand is lifted to mimic a greeting gesture, but it fails miserably. *I'm so awkward.*

"Uhm... would you care for a cup of tea in my office?"

A short pause. "The lunch break is still ongoing, and I was planning to speak to you anyway." *Wow, Satsuki, great choice of words. That was so awkward.*

Ryūko widens her eyes in surprise at the invitation. Never would she have guessed Satsuki was willing to spend time with her so soon. *I mean, she is freaking busy. I just don't fit into her schedule.* Spotting the dark circles under the older girl's eyes, Ryūko retorted:

"As much as I would like to talk to you, don't you have other things to do in your lunch break? Your schedule must be packed as hell."

"... I insist, Ryūko. My schedule has nothing to do with-" she gestures between the two of them "-this. It has nothing to do with wanting to talk to you for a bit."

"Yesterday, you seemed to think differently." *Shit, I wanted to apologize. Screw my temper.*

"I totally agree. That is also one of the reasons I want to talk to you. Is that alright with you?"

What? Her look is almost pleading, which is something Ryūko has never seen before. Before she could utter an answer, a shove brought the girl away from her thought process.

"Ryūko-chan would love to have a nice chit-chat with you, Satsuki-sama! And don't worry 'bout me, Ryūko-chan, I'm gonna explore the new food stand outside! Mom made way too few croquettes, so I'm buying some bread to fight the hunger."

As swiftly as she barged into their conversation, she was gone, vanished in the blink of an eye. With a smirk crept onto her face, Ryūko let out a small giggle. Satsuki turned towards the unfamiliar sound, looking pleasantly amused.

"Guess I can't go back now." Her eyes lit up. "So, Satsuki, where is that office of yours?"

During the trip to Satsuki's office it is deadly quiet, neither girl daring to start the conversation. Only the rhythmic thuds marking each step were echoing through the corridor. It was awkward, to put it mildly. Ryūko walked an appropriate distance behind the older girl, watching the white heels steadily pushing forward. *It takes a milelong way to even get there. Are we secretly tunneling to another building or so? 'Cuz I cannot remember the school being so immensely vast.*

Still lost in her train of thought, she almost bumped into her sister's back as the older girl suddenly stood still in front of her. *What the heck, Satsuki?!* Ryūko looked up, where the door to Satsuki's office came into vision, indicating they arrived at their destination.

"Uh... oh, so here's your office, huh? I must say it's a freakishly long way to reach your headquarters. Man, I feel like I've just run an entire marathon!" Ryūko sheepish rubbed the back of her neck. *Did I overdo it?*

Satsuki cocks one of her prominent eyebrows. "Oh, don't be such a drama queen. We both know your stamina far exceed mine, and this

little walk I definitely consider a piece of cake."

That quick sarcastic retort immediately lifted the mood drastically. It was as if the ice was broken between them, and both of them welcomed it desperately. What initially was a quiet and awkward affair suddenly became a back-and-forth game between two equally matched girls.

Satsuki's right hand reaches for the doorknob, and her upper body turned towards her sister. Her expression turned from provoking to serious and a tad repentant.

"Ryūko, I am supposed to have my two-weekly meeting with Gamagōri, Inumuta, Sanageyama and Nonon in 15 minutes, so they are probably waiting for me in my office. I'll go inside and notify them about the change of plans. I'll be back in a minute, so in the meantime, could you wait outside?"

"No probs, whatever floats your boat." *See, I figured she'd already scheduled something for this lunch break. Why is she so keen on talking to me? I'm not gonna die waiting for another few days.*

And it's not like she'd never done it before either.

A few minutes later the door opened, revealing Satsuki with her four faithful Devas. A quick farewell was given by the five of them, as Ryūko was forwarded to the office. Upon sliding past Satsuki's companions, soft semi-sincere whispers were exchanged between the Devas and the younger girl. Some were good-luck wishes, some were more in the direction of 'watch what you gibber' and 'be careful or else' threats. Sanageyama even managed to poke the girl in her left side, while his penetrant eyes spoke volumes. *Still as protective as ever. Typical.*

The silent glaring contest was cut off by Satsuki, who shushed them away in an elegant manner. Smiling, she shifts her attention to her last-remaining family member.

"Come in, Ryūko. We have a lot to talk about."

In All Honesty Part 2

Chapter 6 - In All Honesty Part 2

A/N:

Here's the sixth chapter already. Enjoy!

To K2-Black-Panther: Glad to hear you like to little intermezzo with Sukuyo-san. Requests and suggestions are, of course, always welcome as long as it does not mess with the plot in any way!

Ryūko steps, albeit hesitantly, into the room that has been transformed to function as Satsuki's office. Curiously, she takes in all the details. The pure white walls, the three colourful pieces of art covering them. The big mahogany desk that stood promptly in the spacious area, on which two high stacks of school documents were dumped, eagerly waiting for the girl's signature. The small meeting area, fully equipped with three black leather chairs and a small table for the usual coffee or, in Satsuki's case, incredibly bitter tea.

Satsuki, on her account, watches Ryūko inspecting the room with curious eyes, struggling to not let her mouth fall open in amazement. She stifles a laugh. *She is so carefree and innocent, despite the tough image she has built over the past few years. A girl with two faces, I now know.* For about half a minute, the older girl observes her sister's antics, until she has enough of her own passivity.

"Ryūko, shall we sit down? And Soroi, could you make us some tea? Thank you."

As her faithful butler busies himself with the preparation for brewing his special tea, Satsuki moves to the clean but relatively cozy meeting area amidst the spotless office interior. The younger sister sees her intention from the corners of her eyes, and follows her

example, walking from the other side of room towards one of the other unoccupied seats.

In an elegant motion, Satsuki sits down and crosses her legs. Ryūko, on the other hand, plops onto the chair, wide-legged while crossing her arms. Upon seeing the dignified figure of Satsuki, she blushes slightly, immediately untangling her arms and bringing her knees together. Is it an act of shame or an attempt to imitate the other's elegance, Satsuki was not sure. Either way, she found it quite adorable.

"Uhm... so..."

Satsuki looks the speaking girl square in the eyes, gently but full of interest and anticipation. The blush on Ryūko's face reddens even more. *I wonder if I've seen her this flustered before.* The straight-haired girl waits patiently for her companion to gather her courage, never averting her gaze away from the girl.

"Like, I mean... what did ya want to talk to me 'bout, Satsuki? Bringing me to your office and all."

Meanwhile, Soroi serves two steaming cups of tea, after which he silently leaves the room, shutting the door behind him with a soft click. Satsuki leans forward, taking the cup in-between her two hands, savouring the warm and delicious aroma of the butler's special brewing mixture.

"Mhm... just catching up I guess. It's been a while since we had a nice long conversation." *If we have even talked comfortably for longer than a few minutes at all, without the screaming and fighting and battling.*

The other girl stayed silent, as if anticipating more from Satsuki. More words, more reasons to let the conversation flow naturally. Now, the silence has certainly turned awkward. And that unnerved both girls greatly. *It is, technically speaking, a family get-together after all.*

Suddenly, Satsuki decides to speak up once more. "You know, Ryūko, I have to admit I was a complete bitch yesterday. And I want to apologize for that. Sincerely."

There, I said it. Ryūko, who was reaching for her cup of tea at that moment, freezes, looking up at her sister in surprise. Readjusting herself to sit more straightly, more stiffly almost, the girl utters:

"No biggie... I forgot 'bout it a long time ago. I guess ya must be freaking busy handling both the school and the company." You liar, you promised Sukuyo-san, Mako AND yourself to be honest. And then, in front of Satsuki, you did it again. Man up, and get on with it, you idiot.

Satsuki watches in fascination as the other girl shakes her head, battling her inner turmoil.

"No wait, actually I've thinking 'bout our previous chat as well. A lot. And I've been wanting to apologize to you for my shitty attitude. I was a complete bitch as well."

Now, that was a total shock for the older sister. Frozen like a statue, the cup was threatening to slip from her fingers. Fortunately, she recovers in time to fasten her grip on the object. *Why would she be sorry? It was completely my fault things turned out this way.*

"..."

Both girls suddenly found the carpet much more interesting. Ryūko swifts her foot nervously, while Satsuki fiddles with her cup of tea. The normally tough and resolute girls with iron wills turned into stuttering nerve-wrecks overnight. It was a sight to see, the most-feared persons in town being this vulnerable in front of one another. Tied by fear, swayed by emotions. *We're clueless.*

Nevertheless, both girls were silently preparing themselves for this emotional fight. In the way they always proceed, very much following

their usual routine, alone. The uncomfortable silence lasted for another ten seconds.

"I'm sorry, Ryūko." A whisper. "I'm sorry, Satsuki." A mumble. Both at the same time, and both with the same amount of regret written in-between these three words.

Upon hearing the other's apology, they dared to come face-to-face. And simultaneously, those faces split into broad smiles. It was the start of what would be a friendly chat. They talked about the life with the Mankanshoku family, about the reorganization within REVOCs, the rebuilding of Honnōji Academy, the past few weeks after the incident. Satsuki's new short-haired coupe.

They had a good time together, which was actually a first. *Since forever.* The available fifteen minutes went by in a flash, and both were reluctant to say their goodbyes. But they did, as lectures and meetings were waiting for them. Responsibilities they could not get out of. Upon opening the door of Satsuki's office, the four Devas were patiently awaiting their arrival, as did Soroi.

"Goodbye, Ryūko. I had a great time."

"Uhm, yeah... me too. Bye, Satsuki." And this time, the greeting gesture, now a means of saying goodbye, did succeed. The younger girl turned a 180 degrees and took her leave. The older girl watched her little sister's back while she strolled through the hallway.

Until next time, little sister. Whenever this will be.

Hope to see you soon, Satsuki, if we can manage to snatch some free time from your busy schedule.

Satsuki's POV:

I don't know how long I've been staring lifelessly at the empty hallway, while I keep my four Devas waiting outside the office,

postponing our meeting even further. A hefty shove jolted me out of my trance. My eyes search for the person responsible for this rough treatment, and eventually they fall on Sanageyama, who stood closest to me.

"It seems ya haven't quite finished talking yet, Satsuki-sama. You should catch up to her."

And invite her for a next time, is what I unconsciously added to his sentence. I didn't need to be told twice. *Don't make the same mistake again*. Quickly I excused myself, fleeing the scene.

I ran and ran, frantically searching for my little sister, rushing through the corridors without raising suspicion among the students lingering in the hallway, who were chatting away during lunch break. Left, right, descending the stairs, speeding around the corner. Trying to spot that blue and red-streaked head of hair. Then that familiar back came into sight and I feel a whelm of relief washing over me. Rushing to her side, I reach out to her by trying to grab the sleeve of her school uniform.

"Ryūko, wait!" I exclaimed, after my attempts to get a hold of her were to no avail.

She turned around and I was confronted with her thunderstruck expression, which was clearly visible on the entirety of her face, with her wide eyes and open mouth.

"Sa-Sa... Satsuki! What're you doing here?"

The stuttering mess called Ryūko can be so unbelievably cute at times. Meanwhile, I'm busy catching my breath, as her pace of walking was way higher than mine. I crisscrossed the entire school building to find her again, while she was steadily proceeding towards her goal, leaving me to wonder where she might be. Once my breathing was back to normal, I coughed softly.

"Uhm... Ryūko, sorry for intruding once more. I totally forgot to ask you something back at my office. Do you have a minute?" *I'm desperate, can't you see that, Ryūko?*

"No probs, Satsuki. The lunch break isn't over yet, and Mako is probably still drooling over the canteen food. Wait... shouldn't you be at your meeting with the four midgets? What happened?"

I shot an annoyed glance at the girl, signalling that her comment was crossing a certain line that shouldn't be crossed. Calling my four Devas 'midgets' in my presence. Inwardly, I struggled between feeling offended and being amused. *Guess she won't change that easily though. And I wouldn't have it any other way.* She flinched a bit upon seeing my deadly gaze, but quickly regrouped herself.

I answer. "I'll be going back in a minute, but not before I invite you to my house."

"Wha- " My sister stammered, barely able to spout complete words from her lips.

"I believe we have to catch up on a lot ourselves, which we can only make do by meeting up regularly... so, will you come to the mansion this week?"

I'm surprised by my own braveness. If only I were that confident about all this, about building a family bond with Ryūko. I'm just clueless. I fidget a bit, out of habit, to make the time go faster.

"Yeah sure, Satsuki. When do you have time? All days are fine by me, actually."

"Friday afternoon, then? The rest of the Mankanshoku family can come as well, if that makes you more comfortable." *That way, I can thank them for their hospitality and care for Ryūko.*

"Uhm... I guess that would work. I'll discuss it with Mako and the family at home, but I think they are by default jumping at a chance of

visiting such a luxurious house." *Her 'home' is there, that's right. Her home is with the Mankanshoku's.*

No words can described the happiness I'm feeling upon hearing her accept the invitation. I stumble a "okay" her way, and she voices her okay as well. We smile together.

"Until Friday then. Goodbye, Ryūko."

"Bye, Satsuki."

I'm going to meet her again soon. She's coming to the mansion, to the family house. Ryūko, my little sister, my sole-remaining family left. She's coming home for the first time in forever. It is her real home, although she won't ever see it that way. Make sense, with a family like ours. With me.

Ryuko's POV:

I'm home again, and I still can't grasp the whole rollercoaster that I've been riding on today. The food fight in the canteen, the talk with Satsuki, her invitation for coming Friday, the sudden *enjoyable* lectures afterwards. And then the comment from Mako about me grinning like an utter idiot. As if I've made a complete personality change over the lunch break. *I was just happy, okay? No big deal.*

"Welcome home, Ryūko-chan, Mako-chan!"

Sukuyo-san rushes over to me and Mako and crushes us in one of her bear-hugs. *I'm home.*

"Ne, mom, today was super-duper weird! People started fighting over bread, and then I got myself some free sandwiches." She circles around us two while visibly explaining her adventures in full glory and with her usual passion.

"Is that so? And you Ryūko-chan, you got yourself some free food too?"

"Nah, I went to talk to Satsuki during lunch break. It was actually quite fun."

"..." Sukuyo looked shocked but content and a tad proud. *Probably since I've been honest with Satsuki.* I give her a knowing smile.

"Yes, yes, and Ryūko-chan was SOOOO happy the whole day, I couldn't even recognize her! The grumpy teddy bear vanished, like - POOF-" She was wildly imitating me, *which was actually vaguely familiar*, in order to express the contents of her story.

"So you were able to tell Satsuki-sama 'bout your feelings, Ryūko-chan? Good job, good job." Sukuyo-san rubs her left palm against my stubborn locks, which makes me a bit annoyed to be honest.

A blush crept onto my face, while mumbling in response. "Oh yeah, before I forget... Satsuki invited you to come to her fancy house this Friday. All of us. Wanna come?"

"WOWIE, THAT'S REALLY COOL! CAN WE, CAN WE?!" Mako shot me a puppy-eyed look, and I could imagine a wagging tail completing the picture. Her enthusiasm went through the roof and at some point she started bouncing to relieve her excess of energy. *Which is boundless. A hopeless thing to do, if you ask me.*

Sukuyo-san managed to talk some sense into the ecstatic girl, all while yanking the straps of the girl's bag in order to keep the bounciness in check. She spoke in a calm voice, her eyes filled with sympathy and determination.

"Ryūko-chan, although we would all -" pointing at her overexcited daughter "- love to go with you to Satsuki's home, I believe you girls should have a nice sisterly talk."

But -" *Satsuki was to one proposing this, not me.*

"I think we have different plans for this Friday, so I have to say no on behalf of the entire—" another pointed glance was directed at the brunette "- Mankanshoku family. Do give Satsuki-sama our regards and best wishes, though."

She smiles gently, which reminds me of an angel in disguise. *Why did I deserve this wonderful staying place, with this sweet family? I've done nothing to be proud of.* However, I understood Sukuyo-san's intentions. Satsuki and I have to build some sort of relation from scratch, which cannot be done in one day. We have to take it slow, we have to put great amounts of energy in this wound-mending business. *We have to be honest.*

Meeting with Satsuki should bring my past into a broader perspective. *And I'm curious 'bout my past as hell. My Father, that bitch of a Mother, Satsuki's youth. Why I got turned into a monster, why Satsuki got turned into a bitchy dictator, why Mother went completely crazy. I know snippets, but I want to learn them all.*

Until Friday, Satsuki.

Walking On Eggshells

Chapter 7: Walking On Eggshells

A/N:

And then the Spring Break was over (yep, sad). In the end, I managed to produce another last minute creation, which became this seventh chapter. Enjoy!

To K2-Black-Panther: I really just saw your comment before uploading this new chapter. Personally, I don't think dressing up for such a get-together is a typical Ryūko-thing to do (guess it's more like how I image her to be, if you get what I mean). I will try to incorporate some of the aspects in a future chapter though, as I think good ideas should not be left untouched. Yup, I'll see what I can do!

Ryūko's POV:

It took five bus stops from the one in front of Honnōji Academy to reach the Kiryūin estate. The property lies on the other side of town, and I wasn't in the mood for a milelong trip to wherever-it-may-be. It's Friday, 3PM, and the burning sun warms my skin while I shuffle towards the supposed entranceway.

I approach the huge gates looming from my field of vision. Golden gates, irradiating an aura of luxury and prestige. *Kiryūins and their fucking wealth. And, surprise of the century, I am actually one of them, biologically speaking.* The steel framework, just as I figured, I could push aside easily, revealing another few hundred meters of driveway. I shrug, continuing my way to Satsuki's house.

I don't know how long I've been walking, but now, from behind the lime-trees occupying both road sides, the house becomes more and more visible. *You call that a house, Satsuki. It's a goddamn palace.* A

huge cream-coloured building with lots and lots of windows came into view.

Wow, is the one word, the one thought that could justify the sight of *that*. I imaged Satsuki being brought up in this kind of environment, leading an isolated and sheltered life. Not far from mine, as I've been alone ever since I can remember. The villa, palace, *whatever the fuck this thing is called*, gives off a static and almost lonely vibe. Proudly standing amidst the forest of insignificant protectors against the outside world, similar to Satsuki herself.

I'm being lead towards the front door, where I'm welcomed by a handful of similarly dressed people. *Houseworkers? Butlers? Cleaners? Whatever.* They tell me to wait in the entrance hall, which I do, since I have no other choice. No way I can find my way in this immense building, let alone escape from it if needed. It's way too freaking big.

Out of boredom, I start whistling a tune while tapping my foot impatiently against the marble pavements. My hands are still deeply settled in my pockets, and my eyes fly from one valuable item to the other. The chandelier, overflowed with crystals and diamonds, intrigued me in a way, reminding me of the blinding presence Satsuki once had. Shining brightly whenever she was talking, giving speeches or making a point. *Satsuki, my sister.*

The 'just a minute' seems to last eternity. *From where do you have to come?* And then I heard footsteps on the grand stairs, indicating the older girl had finally arrived. I look up, deciphering the source of the high click-clacks of her heels. When ours eyes met, I smile.

"Ah, Ryūko, I'm sorry of the long wait. I've been busy with some paperwork in my home office." She gives me an apologetic smile. *Genuine, always so genuine.*

"That's alright, really. I was admiring your fancy interior anyway." I point to the chandelier.

A chuckle. "Is that so? Then, you care for a tour around the house first?"

For the umpteenth time, I am left speechless. *Why would she offer me that? It's not as if I'm interested in buying this villa-palace-house-thing. I just want to talk to you, Satsuki.*

"Nah, I'm good. To be honest, I'm quite horrible at directions. Besides, it's not as if I would come by that often." *Since you're freaking busy with your responsibilities and all.* It was as if I shot an arrow straight through her heart. That very amount of dejection I could detect in her eyes. *Did I say something wrong, though? It is the absolute truth. Period.* In a flash of a second, our eye contract is broken by Satsuki hanging her head down in disappointment or something along that line. My hands tremble slightly at the discovery of Satsuki's depressed mood.

Before I can reach out to her, however, she steadies herself in front of me. A determined voice reaches my ears, hiding any flavour of her previously dispirited stance. "Well, shall we go then? I let Soroi prepare some tea for us in advance." She gestures towards the hallway on our right side.

I have no choice but to comply to her invitation. *I came to her place after all. And I've been looking forward to it ever since that lunch break from three days ago.* Silently, we walk next to one another, neither of us trying to even bring up the courage to initiate a conversation. I completely ruined the happy atmosphere that hanged around us. *You idiot.* I don't mind silence, that is, as long as it does not turn awkward or worth toe curling. Fortunately, that is not the case, not this time.

We go inside some random room on our left, and upon entering I am once again taken away by the elegance of its content. Everything is sparkling without making is too over-the-top or arrogant. The walls picked my interest most. I figure this is a room in which Satsuki is often spending her time, judging from its location and its interior. Nevertheless, no portraits or photos covered the pure white walls.

No familiar object or evidence of people living in this mansion. So strange. *This is not a hotel or pension, on the contrary. It's a proud family's home, yet it feels distant.*

I dare to ask, once I see Satsuki taking position onto one of the comfortable looking lounge seats. "Ne, Satsuki, why don't you have any photos of yourself or the family hanging 'round here?"

Satsuki's POV:

Really? Is she really asking me this question? I turn my head towards my curious younger sister, who still isn't done thoroughly investigating the guest room. It occurred to me that nobody had even dared to ask me these personal questions. *Maybe that's why I'm confused as to what to do.*

I stutter, sincerely wondering this. "W-Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious." Ryūko shot back, and glances over her shoulder. Attentive but not too overbearing.

For a few seconds, I ponder on what to say. On what to reveal to my relatively unknowing sister, who is cluelessly oblivious to the happenings within our family. I sigh deeply. If I'm exposing all of our family secrets right this moment, I'm afraid she would back away from this whole business. *I would too, if I were in her shoes.* If I don't say anything at all, that is practically admitting she does not belong to our family and therefore should be kept from knowing. *That I consider unbearable.*

My sister looks at me questioningly. "In my younger years I never had the time for such trivial businesses." I start slowly, letting the information fall down bit by bit. "My... our Mother used to prepare me for taking over the Kiryūin conglomerate, as sole heir of the family. Our Father was not that concerned about the taking-over processes, but then again, he had other matters to attend to. That was before he flew from our lives, of course."

I sigh once more, releasing some built-up tension, continuing my monologue while Ryūko is still listening. "That's basically why I never took photos when I was younger, and why there are no portraits hanging around the mansion. And honestly, I despite having my 2D face in close vicinity of my Mother's. So, that's why, never and nowhere."

Shuffling of two feet. "Why, Satsuki? I know she's a complete bitch, but why? I've never heard you talk about her before... so, what happened?" Her voice sounds concerned, but I'm just vaguely registering. *You don't want to know Ryūko. You really don't.*

I broke the silence. "It's none of your business, Ryūko." *I spoke a bit too harshly.* "I mean, maybe I'll tell you some time later, when I'm ready. Currently, I'm just not." *Though I hope this will never be brought up again. You don't want to know, really.* "But why -"

"Because my youth wasn't all rosy. No, on the contrary, I've had a quite unpleasant childhood. One I want to forget as quickly as possible. So stop prying Ryūko, because you don't want to know."

Her eyes widen, as my own words slowly dawn on me with full force. *What have I done?* Her shuffling transits into resolute steps in my direction, and lifting my face brings me several inches away from her face. I am close to a flatliner, realizing the deadly gaze and exasperating vibes.

"YOU are the one who don't know anything about MY childhood! Don't judge me like that." She hissed, similar to a rattle snake on high alert. *And you're completely right, little sister. I'm clueless.*

She continues. "I was left ALONE for as long as I can remember. ALONE in our house, our so-called Father always gone off to somewhere, ALONE at all sorts of boarding schools, as soon as I reached that age. I had no easy life either, by no means, so don't go assuming things Kiryūin."

Somewhere along her speech, my hands had started to shake uncontrollably. Suddenly, I've become extremely nervous. Afraid she would be offended, that I crossed a line of no return. *But I'm so desperate, can't you see that, Ryūko?* Hesitantly, I tried to convey my regret through body language, sending signals with my hands and blue irises.

"I-I-I'm sorry, Ryūko... I shouldn't have said that. Indeed, you're right about me not knowing anything about your childhood."

"..."

"But even though I'm sorry, I'm just not ready to talk about my past." *My nightmares, my fears, they will resurface again once I start rambling. And I want to discourage her from wanting to see this ugly side of me.*

"Later, Ryūko, later."

In the corner of her eyes, Ryūko sees her sister shaking. She does try to conceal this fact though, judging the way she holds her hands together, exerting such force that her knuckles see white. Talking about pale and white, so is Satsuki's face. Was she standing in front of these walls, she would not be protruding at all. When her sister's frantic behaviour does not fade away after tens of seconds, Ryūko starts to get worried. Nervousness she feels more and more, as she was the initiator, the perpetrator. The killer of the once-so-peaceful mood. *Are we back to square one?*

However, if the decision would be on her, she would prevent any trust from watering down along the way. They had already made a tremendous effort to make this Friday afternoon possible. All those fights, misunderstandings, secrets. *Get it over with. What do you want, Ryūko?*

Afraid of provoking the already visibly effected girl, Ryūko proceeds hesitantly, albeit cautiously. "It's okay, Satsuki. I'm sorry as well. I

went too far, I pried too much. You still have your privacy, and I should respect that." Slowly, the words rolled from her tongue, chosen with great care. *It's like walking on eggshells. Like crossing a minefield, trying to survive with minimum damage.*

Now it was Satsuki's turn to remain silent. Ryūko wasn't sure if the other girl would even be able to give a civil answer, observing the downhearted state she resided in. Again, she took the lead. "Then, lemme ask you something, Satsuki. What shall we do from now on?"

Upon hearing those words, Satsuki perked up, the question conveying a message worth reviving. A hoarse voice spoke to the smaller girl. "W-What do you mean? I'm not sure I f-follow you, Ryūko."

Said girl sighs, growing frustrated by the turn of events. "I... want to know what we should do to get to know each other. Talk? Just meet? Going out somewhere?"

"..." *Please, talk... I'm really clueless, Satsuki.*

"I mean, we obviously started off on the wrong page today. But never minding all that, I don't want this to end this here... do you?" She asks with genuine curiosity. *Say something, 'cuz I'm growing incredibly desperate.*

"No, I don't." It was a short answer, but that didn't matter. *Thanks, Satsuki.*

Ryūko's irises travelled from her sister's figure to the ceiling, running her left hand through her messy hair. She was wrecking her brain for more encouraging words, more gently nudges for Satsuki to voice her current uncertainties and dreams for the future. Those words were not needed, however, as the older girl was strong. *Or pretending to be strong.* Either way, she mentally regrouped herself to be able to speak without stuttering and stumbling over words.

"Ryūko, let me make this clear." Her determined and charismatic tone had resurfaced from the depth of dejection. "I DO want to get to know you better, and I DO want to tell you about my past as well. However, I do need time to come to terms with my own demons first."

She continued. "You are my only family left, the only one I can call 'family' on this godforsaken planet. I'm just not aiming to build some friendly relationship with you, Ryūko."

Wait, what? Has she decided to dispose of me, as I'm one with extremely deadly and dangerous roots? That's so hypocritical, Satsuki. At that moment, Ryūko was not sure how to react. For fraction of a second, she stood as frozen. She wanted to retort angrily, but she was cut off.

"I'm not aiming to build some new friendship." *You said that already. You really want to torture me?* It was the opposite, really, as the conversation took a 180 degrees turn with a soft whisper: "I'm desperate for much more than that."

The lifted eyes shot back to the shaking leaf on the black leather couch. "For as long as I can remember, I had thought about getting revenge. For my dead Father, for my dead sister. For the innocent lives who were thrown away in favour of the Life Fibers."

A sigh before she rambled somewhat further. "That time is gone, and now I know that that little sister from those horrible childhood stories is actually alive and well. And YOU are that sister. Even though I don't know what families are supposed to do, and even though I don't know how a big sister should act, I want to become your family."

"... Satsuki..." She called me her sister. Jeez, that's so freaking mindboggling! Out of the blue, she called me her SISTER! Just... I can't wrap my head around it. It's all so foreign. "So, that's why I want to take it slow, Ryūko. Is that alright with you?"

The younger girl doesn't have to think for long, despite her initial shock. "That sounds perfect."

The smiles that were exchanged at that moment were not expressing pure happiness, as what once was the case, in fact, was the case fifteen minutes ago. One smile was leaning towards a reassuring nature, whereas the other was a mixture of relief and gratitude. They knew.

Baby steps are still a way of going forward.

Birthday Revelations Part 1

Chapter 8 - Birthday Revelations Part 1

A/N:

*Sorry for the delay |(*o*)/ I'd been quite busy with study trip preparations, actually going on a study trip for a week, exams and several other deadlines, all while making arrangements for my upcoming bachelor thesis as well. A lot of juggling, so to say. But ultimately, I managed to bundle my creative output into another chapter. It's a bit on the short side, but part 2 will be coming soon... Enjoy!*

A wooden door was slammed with an extreme lack of pity for the poor tortured object. "I'm home!" Ryūko shouted, while balancing on one foot in an attempt to undo her left shoe with a minimal amount of two fingers. Her eyes darted downwards, focusing on unravelling the mystery pattern in which her shoe lashes were tied. When her task was completed successfully, her vision became blocked with no other than four members of the Mankanshoku family, all eager to hear about her adventurous meeting with Satsuki. They were bouncing, struggling to get attention, while exclaiming in an absurd disharmony.

In short, it could be called a definite chaos that was ensuing upon her homecoming. Sukuyo gentle voice echoed something along the lines of "how did it go?", whereas Mako high-pitched tone worded a "how's Satsuki-sama?". Bazaro and Matarō, typically, were asking about the gold and diamonds and the wealth and the size of the Kiryūin mansion. Guts was barking enthusiastically to support the curious crowd.

A frustrated sigh from Ryūko significantly reduced the noise level. Five heads perked up, eyes sparkling and patiently awaiting an

answer to their hectic questionings. Of course, the cricket chirping lasted a short while, as the anticipation turned into disappointment as they were met with only silence. Suddenly, the blue-haired girl's voice towered over the chattering and murmuring:

"Enough, be quiet y'all! Jeez, can't you just talk to me one at a time... I'll get some sort of spontaneous migraine if you keep blabbering to my head like this."

Another sigh coated with irritation. "It was fine, okay?! I talked, Satsuki talked, and that's it I guess. Ah, before I forget to mention, yes, we did drink a few cups of tea... but that should be no big surprise."

Mako decided to speak up, this time without the deliriousness from before. "Awh, but Ryūko-chan... that is, like, NO details at all! What did you and Satsuki-sama talk about?" To put some force to her words, she started pouting, similar to a puppy on pleading duty.

A hand from Sukuyo made Ryūko's face turn a sharp 90 degrees, her eyes searching for the source of warmth and reliance. "Ryūko-chan, you look a bit spaced out... and, well, you look exhausted and not happy like I wanted you to be. Tell me dear, what happened? Did you and your sister manage to talk things out?" A slight squeeze of the comforting hand brought fluttering feelings to the girl's stomach. *It has been a long time since I was supported and taken care of like this, after all. I'm damn lucky, lucky to have such a place to call home.*

"..." It made Ryūko a bit speechless. What did she want to reveal from their conversation? What did she want to bring up from the desperate and vulnerable Satsuki she had seen an hour ago? It had been confidential, if not secret, and maybe only meant for her. *My sole-remaining biological family. My sister, or so she did call me.*

Meanwhile, the male fraction of the family left the two-way monologue, feeling they don't belong in this serious turn of events. Mako shifted a little closer to the thunderstruck bluenette, while

Sukuyo started rubbing the girl's shoulder with her thumb, both encouraging the girl to give some kind of response. They didn't know about the inner turmoil raging inside Ryūko's mind, who'd been indecisive still.

"Well..." And again, a slight hesitation. "It was... awkward in the beginning. But then, I totally screwed up by asking some fucking random question, after which she flipped-"

"That does not sound like a good get-together, Ryūko-chan." Mako deadpanned. *It was true, really.*

"However, eventually we did talk things over. I mean, seriously, we discussed and drank some tea as well... and we decided to take things slowly." *Yup, slowly. To prevent hell from breaking loose.* "You mean-" Sukuyo pried a bit, trying to get a tad bit more out of the cryptic storyteller.

"Satsuki and I decided to meet up more often, though we will not be too overly touchy-feely or super-personal all of a sudden. We're both kinda awkward on the family thingy, and we both have some demons to deal with - *her words, not mine, definitely not mine* - from our not-so-perfect childhood."

"That sounds like a great plan, Ryūko-chan. Honestly."

If only time allows us to meet up that often. If only Satsuki or I bring up the courage to initiate any form of friendly contact. And if, only if, we are both willing to let go of our past, I can be a tiny bit hopeful towards a tight family bond with my sister. My patience is not boundless, although I will try my best to pretend it is. One thing I know for sure: there is a long bumpy road up ahead.

Satsuki's POV:

The sunlight irradiates and warms the back of my head as I stand close to the window pane, staring at the memo resting on my night

stand. On it, with a scribbly hand writing, a phone number was written. An extremely vital one. *My little sister's*. She was willing to write it down for me once I asked for it in a casual way, on the pretense of safety measures. The 'just-in-case' scenarios, if you know what I mean.

However, only I know that was not the true reason for requesting her contact information. The source of my curiosity lies elsewhere, the intention for asking came from a completely different origin. I just wanted to know more about her. *That's just pathetic, really*. And to be honest, it is not in my character at all to just call her and make small talks about the weather. *Definitely not*. However, an infinitesimal ounce of my being told me to do it. To ask for her number. *Maybe that was just my desperation speaking*.

My left hand reaches for the small piece of paper, and then I fiddle it in-between my fingers. Maybe that decision wasn't so bad after all. Her birthday is coming up very soon, and I am planning to get her a present. I'll probably call her then as well, since a birthday is supposed to be a joyous occasion, spending together with family and friends while receiving presents and blowing out the carefully positioned candles on a sugar sweet decorated birthday cake. *In normal families that would and should be the case*.

So for me, it is totally out of the question to throw her a birthday party. No, that will probably be arranged by Mankanshoku family in all glory, including the cozy details. *I'm not sure, of course. Though, judging Mako's personality, they definitely will*. Sending her a present will be sufficient, at least for Ryūko and my own satisfaction. She will not even wish for a birthday present from me, in all likelihood. She must be getting tired of my outlandish behaviour, swinging between truly desperate and highly neglecting. *And yes, I'm also that confused and tired*.

The red circle on the calendar is nearing soon. *My sister's birthday*. It is difficult to determine where to set the boundaries. Personally, I want to give her all I can possibly offer, whilst my resources are limitless. *That's what you deserve, Ryūko*. On the contrary, the girl

must be burdened by the sudden attention as well. She had always been alone, after all. Therefore, I have to put some constraints on myself and my need for closeness. *Otherwise, it would be unfair to her.*

I don't want to make advantage of her, doting and pouring all my affection on her. Me doing exactly that, when I could not even answer one innocent personal question from her. The things she is seeking from this newfound family relation are quite different from mine, that I realized today. And in a swift movement, I replaced the white memo onto the same nightstand, sighing deeply.

You don't want to know too much about me, Ryūko. That would only enlarge your hate for our family even further. And your disgust for me as well, as I'm a coward.

Ryūko's POV:

It's the start of a new continuous string of lessons. Monday, hooray. The most incredible day of the bloody week. *Cough, not.* The bright side of the story, however, which could truly make my day quite literally, is that today I'm turning 18. Yep, it's my birthday. On this freaking hectic Monday.

Let me tell you, living with the Mankanshoku's is chaotic by definition. Never will they be prepared, never will they be on time, never will they be comprehensible in the slightest. Especially not when one of the family members has his or her special day. And since I'm considered one of theirs, the waking ceremony started at 6AM this morning.

And I was definitely not prepared for that. Of course, I told them on what day my birthday is a long time ago, and I guess I was expecting something, but this I could not have imagined at all. I don't know what the hell Sukuyo-san put into the first decorated mystery cake we had for breakfast, though I must say I liked the taste of it. Mako was all happy and bouncy, as usual, and in an attempt to wake me

from my slumber, she practically shook by body until the bed sheets flew from my body and I woke from the sudden chill that reached my limps. With my sleep-drunken head I listened to her terrible off-key version of 'happy birthday'. And I thanked her, secretly appreciating the thought, but my precious minutes of sleep looked must more appealing at that moment.

I got some presents as well. Bazarō-san and Matarō gave me an eye-sore of a strapless black dress. *Once a pervert, always a pervert.* I faked a smile and accepted the scarce piece of clothing. From Sukuyo-san I got a relatively decent present, in Mankanshoku terms, as she handed me a hand-written booklet with all of her incomprehensible recipes. *Not that I will be cooking any time soon, but it's the thought that counts.* Last, but definitely not least, I received a black and blue coloured headphone from Mako. How she got the money to buy the thing remains a complete mystery, however, I'm quite happy with it. That way, I can isolate myself from the energetic family with some good up tempo songs if needed.

And Satsuki? Nothing from her. Until now, I haven't spotted her at the school grounds either. *Where the heck is she doing businesses now again?* Honestly, I don't know what I expected from her. I sigh, my head heavily resting on my right palm, elbows on the wooden table. I stare out of the window, for a moment not caring about the lecture. The clouds drift by in a slow fashion, which is quite calming. Like a medicine for stimulating a long and deep thinking process.

I think back to the previous Friday, the day on which I met with my sister at the mansion. It was awkward, but especially Satsuki worded her need for a family bond pretty clearly. I replay that particular conversation over and over in my head: *..and now I know that that little sister from those horrible childhood stories is actually alive and well. And YOU are that sister. Even though I don't know what families are supposed to do, and even though I don't know how a big sister should act, I want to become your family.*"

Family, my ass. Even if she has no clue on how to be a big sister, the least she could do is wishing me a happy birthday. I don't know what

I'm feeling upon thinking back to that Friday, flashing forward to today, my fucking birthday. Am I disappointed? Maybe, but I was certain I did not have any expectations. Although, it could be that I was anticipating secretly. Without me even knowing.

Am I confused? Yep, that's for sure, a complete 100% sure. *What are you thinking, Satsuki?*

Satsuki's POV:

I've been quite occupied today. A packed morning at the headquarters of REVOCS, a formal luncheon meeting with the Board of Directors, after which I made haste to arrive on time at the official opening of our 54th filial. A quick turnback to Honnōji Academy for an hour long sparring session with all Technical Directors, all while making several calls to crucial business relations to maintain our profitable position within the financial market. In one word: busy.

Now, after a whole 15 hour work day, it is time for my first moment of rest, as I relax against the soft cushions on the sofa. Of course, the hot damp of tea is present to null my senses even further, giving me a true feeling of contentment and peacefulness.

My eyes are lost in the vast space of the office before lingering once more on the calendar. The red circle marks the importance of tomorrow. Tuesday, Ryūko's birthday. Yesterday, I went shopping for a suitable present. Ultimately, at the very end of the day, I succeeded. However, I must admit the search turned out to be a lot harder than expected. What do I really know about my little sister? *Nothing you idiot. Having said that, you are never telling more about yourself either.*

I'm going to call her tomorrow. Definitely. Saying my first 'congratulations', heartily wishing her a happy birthday. That's what sisters should do, I figured after all. Maybe I'll look for her during her lunch break, trying to pinpoint her location in the spacious area of the Honnōji Academy's property. If needed, I will have to retort to other

means, making more effort in order to convey my sincere feelings. The present should be delivered to her directly, and it should be done tomorrow, by me. Otherwise, it would have no meaning, with no speck of thoughtfulness. I have to plan carefully.

My eyelids flutter, indicating that my facial muscles are slowly beginning to relax. The now empty cup I neatly placed onto the small accompanying table. Then, my eyes automatically shut themselves as if on cue, knowing that I have no obligations to attend to anymore. I worked myself to the bone today, but tomorrow I will have more free time to spend. An investment to a better family relationship. *To a better bond with my little sister, Ryūko.*

Birthday Revelations Part 2

Chapter 9 - Birthday Revelations Part 2

A/N:

As promised, I'm back again with another chapter! Putting some delay on learning for your exam (which I'll have tomorrow) really helps boiling up enough inspiration to write the ninth paper.

To Dragonjek: Thanks for critically reading my story so far! It's been a while since I watched the Kill La Kill series, so most things I try to note down from both memory and my own imagination. It's good to see people are reading the story and commenting on my view of the characters!

To K2-Black-Panther: To answer your question, I do think Ryūko possesses her own kind of beauty. It is maybe not as elegant as Satsuki, but I believe she has her own charm (which is one of the reasons I'm still loving the series).

Ryūko's POV:

The start of the new day brought nothing out of the ordinary. My blanket felt warm and comfy, so I decided to stay underneath it for a couple of minutes longer. The audible snoring of my roommate made dozing off somewhat impossible though. I nudged Mako with my left foot, but to no avail. Make sense, since throwing a nuclear bomb next to her mattress will not wake her either if she's sleeping this deeply. Never mind then, I give up. Honestly, I wish I could do that as well. *But since the whole Life Fibers business that had never been an option for me. I'm restless.*

Yesterday had been a blast. We ate some more cake after we came home from school, we celebrated, and the party lasted till the small

hours. That was such a bad idea, now that I realize the weekend is still far away. With lead in my feet, and with strained sleepy muscles I sit upright, lightly stretching my arms and shoulders. I groan at the satisfaction of doing so, and slowly I begin to really wake up. It's Tuesday, another day full of lectures. *Yea, so much for a fun morning.*

Yep, it's Tuesday, and yet nothing from Satsuki. I really don't understand, I can't wrap my head around it. One moment she's all talking about being a close-knit family, and then the next moment she is too freaking busy to even send a birthday card. *Or whatever.*

I gave up yesterday, to be honest. I'm sick and tired of being dependent on other people, that's definitely not my way of doing things. I've always been a lonely wolf, I've always run my own affairs. And Satsuki will not make a change in that. *Only Senketsu could.* She will not make me weak, as I'm supposed to be can just do whatever the fuck she wants, 'cuz I don't care anymore.

I'm sloughing towards the bedroom door, when I hear a mopey yet bubbly voice calling out to me. "Ryūko-chan, gooood morning!" Mako turns around, half-asleep, and swings her arms in order to reach out to me. I kind of smiled, I guess, and wished her a good morning in return. *Mornings are never a good thing though.*

Then I really make my way to the kitchen, as I meant to do earlier. Sukuyo-san greets me happily. Just an ordinary morning, indeed, so it brought nothing special. While I'm devouring my sandwiches, I make up my mind. If I see my sister today, I'll tell her. I'll be honest with her, and say that I'm disappointed in her. Honestly, I'm quite curious about her reaction. Did she really forget? Or did you choose to forget, deliberately ignoring me to hint her real thoughts? *I'm curious.*

Also, I promised to be honest, so I'll be honest. *Yep, I decided.*

12:30 PM. Lunchbreak. Quick footsteps were heard in the hallway, a sharp click and clack revealing the fact that the person was wearing heels. That was completely normal, as Satsuki used to wear heels, and did not deviate from her habits ever since. In her arms, a decorated bag rested uncomfortably, itching and waiting to be given to the destined girl. However, she had only 10 minutes of time available, so she should make haste in order to deliver the wrapped up package.

The search turned out to be harder than expected for the older girl. *Why did I build Honn ōji to be this immense? I regret it now, seeing I can't even find one girl utilizing this incredible amount of determination.* It's been 5 minutes already, and still no sign of the blue head of hair so similar to herself. Only 5 minutes remain on her schedule of obligations, which were to be carried out this morning and afternoon. She planned to quit early, after all.

Meanwhile, Ryūko accompanied Mako to the bread stand. Personally, she didn't care for a piece of junk, as Sukuyo's packed lunch was more than sufficient. Maybe some lemon juice would suffice, as that always remains a welcome thought, but these cans could be extracted from the nearest vent machine anyway. No need for a canteen. Mako thinks quite differently, however, as long as her hunger seems limitless.

"Look, look, Ryūko-chan! They have SOOO much delicious foodies here! Don't ya want to try some too? It's SOOO good, yep yep!" She licks her lips and fingers after having gulped down another sweet bun in a matter of seconds.

"Nah, I'm good." In a way of illustrating her lack of appetite, the bluenette rubs her stomach with her right hand, making small circles in a calming manner. It was convincing, so to say.

"Too bad, Ryūko-chan! You're missing out on A LOT OF deliciousness!" And another bun is gone.

Said girl shrugged, not caring at all. Her hands went in the pockets of her school uniform jacket. The break was almost over. A few minutes left. She pokes the greedily eating girl in her side, indicating they should make their way to the classroom again. Mako complied, skipping behind the grumpy looking girl with great enthusiasm.

On their way back, Ryūko took a quick glance to the outside from through the corridor's windows. *What a day. When can I put my head in a pillow and scream my frustrations out? Damn you and your speeches, Satsuki. Damn you.*

Satsuki's POV:

I tried my hardest, but to no avail. I couldn't find her during the lunchbreak. Fortunately, I made quite a bit of room in my schedule from all the workload I processed the previous day, so in a few hours I will have another chance at finding her. For now, a stack of papers is waiting eagerly for me to be signed and checked.

So off I went. I grabbed my pen from its holder, and started writing and writing. The hours flew by, and before I knew it, the stacked degraded to mere sheets of paper. And then the last one went underneath my labouring right hand in order to become ready for take-off to somewhere useful. I'm done, I've finished it all. *Finally, it's time to search for my little sister. It's time to give my present to Ryūko.*

Oh, I forgot. Of course, she is still having her lectures. And it's definitely not worth dragging her out of the classroom. I figure she has a lot of catching up to do, still, due to the whole school transferring and getting involved with the Life Fibers business. In half an hour she will have no more classes left, which means I have some time to myself right now. *I suppose I could drink some more tea then, or continue on this particularly interesting book.*

Or perhaps I could take a stroll through the school. Just a quick unannounced inspection, checking whether improvements were

effective and reorganizations and rebuildings are actually leading to a better educational system. I decided against it, guessing it would cost me too much of my scarce free minutes. And I could not afford to miss Ryūko this time. *I still have a present to give.*

So I went with slowly moving towards her classroom. After all, it still takes roughly ten minutes to walk from door to door. Also, as I'm striding through the corridors, I have the opportunity to make some small talk with nearby teachers and staff about their experiences during their first week at Honnōji Academy. A win-win situation, which will eventually lead me to be somewhat early for Ryūko's classes to end if I continue along this walking tempo. However, better be 5 minutes early than 1 minute late. *Because that's out of the question.*

Twenty-five minutes and seven conversations later, I arrive at my destination. Class 2-3's sign hangs proudly outside the classroom on the wall right above the wooden door. They are indeed having their last lecture, seeing the nearest students visibly run out of concentration through the broad window on the left. I kind of sigh in relief. *What if they suddenly got off earlier due to some unforeseen circumstance? I'd be doomed.* Meanwhile, I lean back on the opposite wall, arms crossed and filled up with boundless patience.

The present I did bring with me again, nicely settled in my right hand that clutched the bag and its content with care. I shift my foot, look down, and play with the frills that decorated the bag. How is it always that these type of 5 minutes take the longest? *It's a matter of desire, I guess.*

Another sigh, another shift of feet. Fingers playing, now with the bag straps.

A look through the window, a glance at the classroom. Ryūko is out of sight, to my disappointment. The angle from here is simple too impossible to make it work. *Have patience, Satsuki.*

Another fiddle with my left heel. I stretch my arms lightly. I sigh once more.

Suddenly, a bell rings, sounding almost holy to me. The saviour of my millennium long wait. *Hallelujah*. The cue for students to stand up and leave the classroom was heard, and so they did not waste any time in throwing the door wide open. The high schoolers streamed out of the room in an instant, all desperate for some fresh air, it seems.

And then, last but especially not least, a bobbed brunette skipped outside, accompanied by Ryūko. She somewhat slouched after the happy smaller girl, but that is so typical for her. *That's just Ryūko, and I wouldn't have it any other way*.

She hadn't seen me yet, so I decided to initiate contact. I pushed myself off the wall, so that I come to stand in the middle of the corridor. The bag I leave in my right hand, while my left hand sort of tries to wave a welcome in an unconscious way. *Wow, that's quite awkward*. My voice even sounds unfamiliar, though I'm certain I was not nervous before. *Am I now?*

"Ryūko!" I manage to exclaim. That seems to work, as her head perks up, her blue eyes wide in surprise. However, that surprise quickly flashes into a slight grim expression.

Then, she mumbles in response: "Great... Satsuki. What are you doing here?"

Both girls were surprised. Ryūko was astounded by the fact Satsuki was awaiting her by the exit of the classroom. Satsuki, on the other hand, was perplexed by the younger girl's sudden change in behaviour. *So indirect, no, distant would be more fitting*. For a little while, the two just stared at each other, reading the other's facial expression.

It was time to get to the point, Satsuki knew. *I would do everything in my power to not let it escalate like the previous time. Although I do not know what is the matter now*. She took a step forward, facing the smaller bluenette with an open attitude.

"Ryūko, I was waiting for you. You see..."

"Yup, I saw. You're here." Again, that impassive undertone of hers resurfaced. *What did I do?*

"Well, happy birthday, sister."

The younger girl couldn't believe her ears. Her sister did not forget her birthday, not at all. Instead, she was late and retarded and incredibly ignorant to this fact. She eyed the bag in Satsuki's right hand, *probably a present or whatever*, but felt nothing. She felt empty, not knowing whether she was supposed to be happy or disappointed either way. Ultimately, the creative midway was chosen, as she grumbled in annoyance.

"Wow, sister, great timing! Did you decide to show up for the afterparty?" *The birthday party was lots of fun without you. Yesterday had been a blast, Satsuki.*

"..." For a while, the older of the two looked really confused. Like, really confused, earnestly confused. A few femtoseconds after her sarcastic comment, Ryūko thought about apologizing, seeing nothing but sincere unawareness. She resisted her urge, however, deciding Satsuki is old and wise enough to foresee and plan things correctly.

"You're, like... a day late, Satsuki. But thanks anyway, I guess." Ryūko deadpanned eventually, seeing that the other couldn't utter a single sentence while being busy deciphering the words from earlier.

The silent girl regrouped herself, slowly having awakened from her shocked state. She whispered in clear befuddlement: "No... that's not true."

Wait, what? Now it was Ryūko's turn to enter a phase of bewilderment. A sigh escaped from Satsuki's lips, realization dawning on her as soon as she caught sight of the girl's face.

"Ryūko, your actual birthday is today. Exactly two weeks before mine, to be precise. I'm a 100% certain, it is written down in our family records and domestic genealogy register, black on white. I'm sure, I double-checked it last week."

"..."

"Our Father must have changed your birthdate in order to remain under the radar. That is the only explanation I can think of."

It actually sounds feasible. But...

"Why should I believe you! I've always known my birthday to be on the 15th, so why would I even listen to such a ridiculous one-time comment saying that's nonsense? Why?"

"Well... that's because -"

"No, Satsuki. That's just not right. You know, I was quite disappointed when you decided to sit out on my birthday. But I had fun anyway. The Mankanshoku family treated me well and bought me some nice presents." *I didn't miss you at all. No, at the end of the day, I missed Senketsu.*

"... that's good to hear, Ryūko." A strained smile was forced on Satsuki's face. Ryūko decided to ignore this observation. *You cannot fool me. Not anymore.*

"Here, for you." The white and red striped bag was thrust in Ryūko's hands, who then looked back at the audibly dejected girl with a mixture of confusion and astonishment.

"Wha -"

"I hope you like it. Bye, Ryūko... I wish you a wonderful birthday." And with that, she made a 180 degrees turn after having given her a truly heartfelt smile. As she continues her way down the corridor, the

younger girl's heart throbbed in her chest, not grasping the whole situation at that moment.

What just happened? Did I screw up again? The abandoned bluenette became aware of the fact that she literally cut off a conversation with her sister once more. Satsuki went out of her way to buy a present, despite her unimaginably busy schedule, and found time to personally deliver the bag *one day late, or not, I don't know anymore*, despite the numerous obligations she has.

Suddenly, Ryūko lied cheek down on the cold hallway pavements, as she was ferociously tackled by her roommate, who had been silently witnessing the conversation at a safe distance. In a struggle to force her way upright, the blue-haired ball of misery pushed the wiggly body off her. The energetic girl didn't give up though, as she exclaimed through her reattack: "Ryūko-chan! Satsuki-sama did not forget your birthday after all! I think" - she gestures with great passion the whole story with her usual mimics, eyes extremely wide - "this is AALLL a big misunderstanding! And you sounded a bit like a meanie... SOOOO I feel sorry for your sister."

Mako and her speeches. It puts the nail on the head every single time. Ryūko's eyes darted down to the fancily decorated bag full of mysteries and then up to the empty corridor. She's gone, she's going home as well. Probably, she had already left, feeling an incredible amount of disappointment upon having been excused of the negligence during their confrontation. *Which may be complete injustice from my side. Who knows.*

"Ne, Ryūko-chan." The brunette signals desperately for attention by waving her right hand before said girl's pupils. That seems to work, as they look each other square in the eye now, seriously. "You have her phone number, right? Maybe you should call her when you're home."

That sounded like an actual plan. That was an idea that could be brought into practice, and must be put into reality in order to prevent any escalation from happening *again*. Ryūko is not one for calling

just because and for no reason, but this is a matter of tending to reopened wounds.

And thus she decided: she's going to call Satsuki to apologize and thank her for today. Maybe talk some more, and perhaps unravel the cloudy businesses surrounding her real birth date.

I've been honest with her, and I'll do it again. For the sake of our future together. As friends or as family or as sisters, whichever road will suits us best. But I have to stay on the road first. I'll call.

Phone Call Consolation

Chapter 10 - Phone Call Consolation

A/N:

Whoop whoop, I'm back again with the tenth chapter already. Time flies! It's a bit on the short side, but bear with me... the rest will probably come online somewhere next week.

To K2-Black-Panther: Haha... I'll see what I can do! It's a bit weird to just throw characters into the story without giving a reason for their appearances. It'll probably take me some time bring up all the inspiration and creativity to come up with that reason. Anyway, we shall see...

Ryūko's POV:

The walk towards home was uneventful and boring. While Mako continued rambling about her encounter with Gamagōri at the entrance gate on our way out, I shuffled my feet in attempt to keep myself from being dragged along my own train of thought. *What do I say to Satsuki once she picks up her phone? If she wants to pick up her phone, that is. What should I do -*

"And then, and then, senpai's face went TOTALLY red! Can't you believe it, Ryūko-chan!"

Anyhow, get your funk together, Ryūko. You are not a pushover, you say the things you want to say, and get it over with. I swing my short legs back and forth in a lazy fashion, and in the corner of my eyes I see a giggling and jumping Mako fawning over her own fairy tale.

I thank her for the present. Once I look inside and know what it is, of course. First things first. And then I apologize for my fucked-up behaviour of this afternoon. I'll admit that I was in the wrong .

"Senpai was also wearing our school uniform, the same as us two, Ryūko-chan! I wonder if there was a special one designed for him. I haven't seen ANYONE as huuuuge as Senpai!" Again, Mako was babbling words to my head, which was a typical case of 'one-ear-in-and-other-ear-out' for me, to be honest. She was heavily gesturing while telling her oh-so important story, of course.

"Yes, yes..." I mumbled along, not really knowing what she was talking about. What's so important about that giant anyway?

Mako bounced and bounced and practically flew through the entrance of the Mankanshoku's home as if she suddenly gained a pair of wings. *Such an oddball. The whole family is equal on that aspect, though.*

Eventually, I stepped over the doorstep, unconsciously connecting a string of incoherent words to indicate my homecoming. Sukuyo-san greeted us with a smile, as usual, and asked us about our day with heartwarming interest. My companion started the whole Gamagōri-business from square one, loudly proclaiming all the negligible details with sugarcoating words, turning the casual meeting into some kind of once-in-million-years encounter. *How typical, and how blown out of proportion.*

Once it was my turn to report on my daily events, Mako nudged me slightly, encouraging to initiate the story about Satsuki. Personally, I was not that keen on spilling the embarrassing and shameful encounter, but I did it anyway. They were Sukuyo-san and Mako, after all. If not them, I couldn't trust anyone in this hellish world. *Ever since Senketsu burned that day, it had been only them.*

"So, what are you waiting for Ryūko-chan? Let's see what Satsuki-chan has got you." Sukuyo-san eyed me with a warming gaze, and I had no choice but to comply. I was kind of curious as well, though I was reluctant on admitting this fact.

I picked the decorated and frilly bag from the ground, which I dropped a few minutes earlier, tired of dragging the rectangular

object until Mako's monologue neared its end. It was not a huge shopping bag, no, it was relatively modest to speak in Satsuki's terms. *I guess she must have reigned her wealthy desires in an attempt to restrain her spending streak. It's silly and stupid to expect that kind of generosity from her, anyway. Well, I don't know what to think at all.*

I opened the bag, only to find a matching wrapping paper surrounding a rather fluffy thing. *Something soft? Clothes? Do I look that disgusting in my casual wear?* I kept pondering on what to find inside, that I almost forgot to open the package. That was, until Sukuyo-san gently nudged me on the shoulder, waking me from my thinking trance.

Afraid to damage the delicate object, if it was delicate at all, I freed the wrapping paper of its supporting tape and gently undid the present of its frail concealing cage. *What the - ?* My eyes widen in realization upon recognizing the content. *How did she even think of getting me this?*

It turned out to be motorcycle jacket, and a fancy one at that. Completely covered with my type of colours, that is, red, white and black. The fabric is not too thick and probably made of some high-end bikers' material, as I feel kinda leathery between my thumb and index finger. *You've outdone yourself, Satsuki. I mean, its fucking-fucking fantastic if you ask me. I totally like it, no, I love it. Really, this is sooo something I would wear.*

I showed the jacket to Mako and Sukuyo-san. "Wowie, Ryūko-chan! That looks SUPERDUPER cool!"

"Satsuki-chan must have put lots of effort in searching for this jacket." Sukuyo-san commented. *I suppose that's true. Hell, you're not able to find it in a random store.*

The guilt from earlier, which I'd hided on our way home, came to resurface in full force. *Yup, I have to give her a call right this instant.* I excused myself, and flew upstairs to find my cellphone. I don't use

the thing too often, so I didn't bring it to school today either, which is why it is probably still lying somewhere in our bedroom.

Ah, there it is. Also, Satsuki had given me a note with her number, just like I did that day I went to her house. I put it in the drawer of the cabinet, I remember. The neat handwriting gave form to the 10-numbered string that was her number, which I hastily tapped into my phone. And then I pressed the dial icon, all while holding the thing to my ear in great anticipation.

~ beep ~ beep ~ beep ~

Oh, come on... please pick up, Satsuki. Please, do so... for my sake?

~ beep ~ "... you're speaking with Kiryūin Satsuki." *Hallelujah.*

"Uhm, it's me... Ryūko." *Jeez, what's with the hesitation? You're calling her with a mission. Man up.*

"Ah, Ryūko." A moment of silence. "What a surprise, for you to call me. So, is something wrong? Are you okay?"

"No, no! Nothing is wrong, I guess." *I did something wrong, that's why.* "No, I mean..."

I silently thanked Satsuki for her patience, as I built up the courage to apologize. My eyes wandered from the cabinet to the floor, and then to the ceiling, as if searching for the right words. Couldn't find them, though.

"I meant to say that I'm sorry for today. For all it's worth, I'm sorry... for lashing out and throwing ugly words to your face."

Again, silence came to my ears as I waited for some kind of response. But, nothing from Satsuki.

"Satsuki, you still there?" My voice sounds frail, almost unrecognizable.

"Yes, I'm listening." Satsuki's sudden voice sounds calm and steady, and fortunately for me, not angry or, even worse, sad or dejected. She is willing to hear me out, that was I concluded.

"And also... thanks for the jacket. I really love it! It's definitively one of the best presents I've received, like, in forever. And I'm gonna wear it as often as I can." *Haven't lied a word 'bout that.*

"Oh... I see. Glad to hear that, Ryūko." Her words sounds genuine, and although she comments shortly, I could decipher endearing phrases as well. *She must really wanted to talk to me.*

One thing bothered me though. "So, Satsuki... Sats, I really want you to know that this afternoon was a completely horrible mistake from my part. I mean, I was actually a bit disappointed that you didn't show up yesterday, but I guess that's because nobody knows when my actual birthday is."

"Not anymore. I'm sure Father and Mother knew, but asking them isn't really an option now."

I'm relieved to hear the sarcasm dripping from her comment, I don't know why. I guess she loosened up, and I did as well. We're back on track. I snorted. "Haha, yep, that's true, Sats."

And after that, we talked some more, about yesterday's party, about the presents I got from the Mankanshoku's. About Satsuki's search for my present. About the mysteries surrounding my date of birth, as Satsuki was simply too young to remember. And I can't remember ever having such a long phone call either, which probably meant things were looking bright for us.

We promised to call each other more often. I don't know how often 'often' is supposed to be, but I like the prospect of it. Especially since Satsuki is difficult to meet face-to-face, with her businesses and managing tasks and all. *Things are looking bright for us.*

Satsuki's POV:

I woke up early by a familiar force pulling me out of my sleep. *Of course, it would be weird to not happen for a chance.* Those same damned nightmares again, the ones that keep haunting me. About my Mother, my Father, the Life Fibers. I dream of Nui, the dynamic misery the two of them brought on, making me shiver by the thought alone. Dreams of Ryūko as well, of the time she was in the grasp of those rapists. They're driving me crazy, I'm on the verge of losing my cool. *This can't continue any longer. I am done with this burden, the only weight that is dragging me down.*

Drenched in sweat, heavily breathing. *I am so sick of this.* I turned around on my soft mattress, facing the alarm clock to read off the time. 6 AM. Still early, but not as extreme as on other days. Maybe the phone conversation of last night did some small wonders, albeit not that effectively, and might have worked to some extent.

That phone call allowed me let off some steam. I guess I am getting used to speaking honestly, although that is purely during my conversations with Ryūko. *My little sister, my family.* It was a good talk, it was mentally exhausting and sometimes a tad bit frustrating, but it was good. I like the way things are proceeding with us, the progress we are making in order to becoming closer together. Things are looking more brightly than ever, I dare say.

That reminds me. I check the numbers again. 6:04 AM. Still early, but still, little time has gone by during my mind wandering automatism. *I could call Ryūko again today, really, I could make it a daily ritual.* *Calling my sister.* I like the sound of that whilst a small voice in my head whispers this the impracticality of it. Right now is not a perfect time either, as she will be sleeping for another couple of hours, I figure.

I'll have to be patient and see what the future holds. *In a few hours, I'll have my first try. Until then, I wait, I contemplate.* I open the book that lay abandoned on the nightstand and start reading, hoping that time will pass somewhat faster while doing some active reading.

"Hi, Sats."

"Hey, Ryūko... is something the matter?"

"Nope. Just calling y'know. Why you're asking?"

"Oh no, it's totally okay. I was just curious, and honestly, I was thinking of calling you as well."

"Hahaha, that's some strange coincidence."

"True that, Ryūko. But... I'm wondering, why you're calling this early?"

"Uhm... yeah, that's because I didn't sleep so tight last night."

"Really? You mean, like you're having nightmares?"

"Yup, just once in a while though. It's not that extreme, and eventually it will fade, I'm sure."

"Ah, okay..."

"And you, Sats? You're always up this early?"

"Me?"

"..."

"I couldn't sleep that well either."

"Nightmares?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"About what? What are the nightmares about?"

"..."

Returning the Favour

Chapter 11 - Returning The Favour

A/N:

Okay, my initial plan was to post a new chapter last week somewhere around Wednesday, but I failed miserably in doing so. My bad, and sorry of the wait (~sad~) However, I made one fresh text that ties the loose ends from the previous chapter. So once again, hope you enjoy the read!

To K2-Black-Panther: Those sound like some great ideas! I'll see when I can squeeze them into the story line, if possible, as the story is now largely focused around Ryūko, Satsuki, Mako and Sukuyo. I'm trying to introduce more characters along the way, but it's hard as it's been a while since I watched the series. So, stay tuned!

Flashback:

"Really? You mean, like you're having nightmares?"

"Yup, just once in a while though. It's not that extreme, and eventually it will fade, I'm sure."

"Ah, okay..."

"And you, Sats? You're always up this early?"

"Me?"

"..."

"I couldn't sleep that well either."

"Nightmares?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"About what? What are the nightmares about?"

"..."

Present time:

"Sats?"

To be honest, I really hadn't noticed the name change until now. When did she start calling me that? The older girl shot out of her trance. "Sorry, what?"

"What. Are. The. Nightmares. About?" Ryūko kept stressing each word carefully and thoroughly.

"..." Still no answer from the girl on the other side of the line.

"You know, if it's difficult for you to say, then forget it, sorry I asked. Sorry for pushing you, okay."

"No, uhm-" Satsuki's voice trembled slightly, very uncharacteristically. "- I... wait... I..."

Ryūko, meanwhile, remained silent. Afraid of saying something out of line again, and trying to be patient with the intent to finally hear more about her sister's life. *Because I don't know a thing. I don't know anything 'bout her at all.*

"It's... the nightmares are about her ."

"... oh." A second of silence. "You mean... our Mother, huh?" To Satsuki, it didn't even sound like her sister was surprised. Her way of speaking was more, *how to say*, disdained. Down-right disgusted.

"Well, it does make sense, though. She is, no... was, a real fucking sadist." Ryūko spoke as if she was experienced in the matter, while

spitting the words in dry distaste. That sparked some interest in the girl on the receiving end of the loathing speech. *Why... how... did she?*

"I mean, she kinda tried to rape me together with that Nui-bitch when they sewed Junketsu onto my body. Every single time my thoughts wander to that day... I feel—" Again, that same voice full of hate and revulsion. "I feel freakin' nauseous and sick and—"

A frustrated sigh was heard on the other side of the line. Satsuki, kept listening intently, still partly in shock by the sudden flood of revelations poured down on her, partly busy cropping up her hateful emotions towards her Mother. Now was not the time to barge into Ryūko's monologue, not that she even had the slightest urge of doing so. *Revealing this secret was definitely not something I planned to do. It's exhausting to even think about it, honestly.*

The younger sister's whispers reached Satsuki's ears. "Did she do those things to you too?"

The question was spoken softly and it seemed as if Ryūko was afraid of anyone else overhearing their conversation. Which was strange, of course, at least to Satsuki, as she already spilled the beans and fessed up one of her most kept secrets. The oh-so great Satsuki-sama was not, in fact, a fearless and strong-willed cold woman. No, she forcibly wakes up every night because of nightmares, which are about her Mother and the things she did to her. The way she submitted and succumbed to those tortures, never winning and never getting justice, never rejecting nor stopping them. *No, there was nothing I could do. Or else my plan of revenge would get exposed.*

Satsuki realized that she left her sister waiting eagerly for an answer. So she did answer. Truthfully.

"Yeah."

Ryūko's POV:

My feet make their way past the doorstep of our classroom. To me, it seems like a ten-foot hurdle must be overcome... it's that tiresome. I sigh. *When can I go home? It sucks to be here today.*

Subconsciously, my thoughts drift off to this very early morning, to the phone call I had with Sats. I called just because, as I couldn't sleep that well, and I was maybe naively craving for a bit of attention. *She always treats me with great care, I now know. Calling her was a logical choice.*

Never I would have thought things turned out so differently than I expected. Guess what? She does have nightmares as well, but more frequent, more intense. About her, the bitch. Yep, I hate her, from the bottom of my heart. Even more than before, at least more than when I was in space, face-to-face with the monster she had become. *THAT was supposed to be our Mother, our family. I had an ounce of faith left, that maybe everything could be re-mended. That was merely weeks ago.*

Sats would have made a completely different decision up there, I guess. From the way she spoke, her voice trembling and her words shaking feebly, I realized her childhood indeed wasn't all roses. Whereas I was neglected and discarded, she may have been tended to a little too much, in a disgustingly wrong way. And now, past the not-so innocent childhood years, she is traumatized. Scarred for life. Physically, but even more so, emotionally. Causing her to have nightmares over and over again. And then, strong as she pretends to be, she tries to face it all alone.

I sigh again, continuing my way through the corridor, ever so repeatedly glancing to the whispering and giggling groups of students blocking my path. You know, I'm quite famous here by the way. 'Saviour of the world', or something like that. Heck, all I did was using my inhuman powers to not die in battle. It was an unfair game all along. A game of survival. *I'm not even considered a human anymore.*

This morning, we had a good heart-to-heart, unexpectedly. Sats and I. To be honest, I wish I could do something to help her, to extinguish the ghosts haunting her sweet dreams. She deserves more, after all the fighting spirit she mustered to form a counterforce against this Earth-threatening enemy. One which just turned out to be part of our family as well. *The odds were never in my favour anyway. And that had been proved once more.*

I drag my legs over the pavements on my way to, I don't know, somewhere. Somewhere that is not the classroom and not that girl-gossipy place aka *toilets* either. Mako had run off to grab some buns to eat, again, as she never stopped loving scarfing down food whenever she was allowed to. I sometimes wonder where all the food goes. Haven't figured it out yet, though.

"Ya, if it isn't the underachiever!" Two tiny fingers poke both my sides, to my annoyance, and then one hand ruffles my already unruly locks. That could be no other than-

"Long time no see! Ah whoops, I said it again, didn't I?" The next moment a voice whispers to my left ear. "Satsuki-sama was dead set on keeping me off this habit. Poor girl... so much for making an effort for her sister's sake."

My heart flutters a bit upon hearing that. I don't know why, to be honest. *She has a big heart underneath that thick steel outside layer. Inside, she's a softie, I guess. Otherwise, you won't, cannot, behave this way. So... conscious. Caring.* I turn my head to the pink-haired attacker, while slightly pushing her weight off me.

"Oh, it's you." I kinda overstressed the disappointed tone in my words, hoping she would catch on to it, and leave me alone. *No time for puny pets today, I'm bored and tired of this shit.*

"Eh, what a dismissive response." She short back, *unfortunately*, ruffling my hair for a second time. "Aren't you glad to see me?" Her sugarcoating high-pitched voice makes me sick, really.

"Why should I?" I cross my arms unconsciously, taking a more defensive stance towards the tiny girl. *I really don't want to talk to you right now, so fuck off, Jakuzure.*

"Maybe... well, I forgot. No, of course you wouldn't think of this..."

What the heck?

"Never mind then, I guess I raised my expectations of you unnecessarily."

I have absolutely no idea what nonsense she is spouting. Like, at all. "What the hell are you talking about? Say it so that I can understand."

"Sure."

Urgh, she's really pushing the buttons... to the max. "... so?"

The pink-haired source of irritation had a contemplating look on her face. "Then, lemme ask you a question first. You actually know what is going on in a few weeks, right?"

How dare she even asks this question? Yep, I've been thinking 'bout it as well. Ever since that phone conservation, I did. My eyes observe the subtle change in my opponent's facial expression, which goes from thoughtful to disappointed.

"Yeah, of course I know."

"So... don't you want to have some advice?"

"On what?"

"On what to get her, dummy. Do you want me to spell out everything?"

"Shut up, pinky. And no, I don't want your advice."

"..." Her ego was cranked, I could see it in the way she glued her gaze to the ground, fists balling.

"No, thank you very much for the offer." I added sarcastically. "But I already have something in mind."

"Wha-... wow..."

Triumphally, I huffed. At that moment, I felt like I did good for a change.

"Sooooo, what are you planning? Let me in, I'm dying of curiosity."
Oh no, not a pair of pleading eyes again. They are not as convincing as Mako's, though.

"Heh, it's a surprise."

"Ne, ne, Ryūko-chan!" The brunette blinked her big eyes twice upon trying to make contact with the other girl. It wasn't connecting so well, however, as said bluenette still had her back turned.

"Ryuuuuuuuko-chan!" No response. "RYUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUKO-CHAN!" She was no less than subtle when nudging the girl, pushing with a force almost strong enough to make her tumble from her chair. Almost, since Ryūko grabbed the seat before gravity took over.

"Jeez, Mako... I didn't hear you, okay? Because of your earphones, that is." She gestured towards the present Mako herself gave her for her birthday. Clearly, the girl hadn't noticed Ryūko was wearing it until that moment, seeing the now shocked expression on her bubbly face.

"He he, that explains a lot!" Mako sheepishly rubbed the head of her head, before continuing with her enthusiastic rambling. "Soooo... what did you do today? I haven't seen you much during school today... aaaaand when I went to fetch some buns in the lunch break, you didn't go with me! Tell me, tell me!"

"Nothing worth mentioning though, just a normal, boring, worthless, time-consuming day full of lectures for me." Ryūko mumbled a string of coherent deflating words in a lazy fashion. And to look a bit more interested in life itself, and in her surroundings, she added: "And you, what did you today? Anything special or new?"

"Nope." She popped the 'p' dramatically. "BUUUTTT, I did think the canteen of today was super-duper delicious! And also, I kinda flew into that pink-haired bestie of Satsuki-sama on my way back to the classroom. She looked REALLY gloomy, even when I tried to cheer her up with a funny joke."

Your jokes are so miserable that they are somehow funny. Ryūko shrugged. "Her big-fat assed egoistic attitude must have gotten a dent from a rejection, or something like that. Don't concern yourself with her, though. Strangely, she still thinks that Sats is only confining to her." *Which is obviously not true anymore.*

"You call her 'Sats' now, Ryūko-chan? That's so cute!"

Ewh . "I'm definitely not cute, Mako. And yes, I call her Sats. Any problem with that?"

"No, no... not at all." The brunette resembled a punished toddler. "I think it's wonderful, you getting close to your big sister. You're calling her almost every day too!"

"Yep, that kinda went naturally. I just called her, then called her the next day again, and so forth."

Mako's eyes went wide in great wonder. Meanwhile, the bluenette was wondering what was going through her head at that moment, observing her wiggling pose, cross-legged on the edge of the sofa.

"You know, Ryūko-chan... I hope Satsuki-sama will help you get over your bad history with all the meanies that tried to kill you-" Her brown irises began to water. *Oh, hell no.* "-and all the goodies and friends that you lost."

Senketsu. Ryūko's eyes began to slightly water as well, luckily staying unnoticed by the other girl, after which she quickly dried her eyes with the sleeve of her shirt. "Well, at least I know she is trying to be more familiar with me. She's quite awkward, though."

"Ohhh, really?" Mako's head perked up at that comment, as if she heard some interesting news.

"Really, for sure."

"Don't be such a party-pooper, Ryūko-chan. Tell me more about it! Pretty-please?"

The smaller girl practically begged for more information, her position switching from the seat to the carpet floor, kneeling and her hands rubbing against one another. The pose, in combination with the irresistible puppy eyes made Ryūko push past the limit. They sat together the entire evening, cozily sharing stories about Satsuki and, in case of Mako, mainly Gamagōri. *I'm glad to have a friend like Mako. I'm really glad.*

"Yo, Sats."

"Hey, Ryūko."

"Uhm, so... what are you doing?"

"Nothing in particular right now. But it's almost 11 PM, so that's normal I guess."

"Yeah, true that. It slipped my mind it was already this late."

"Is something the matter? Oh, I'm just wondering, as I see you're calling at this time of the day."

"Nah, not really. I couldn't fall asleep, so..."

"Nightmares?"

"Fortunately not... do you sometimes feel, like, extremely tired but can't manage to fall asleep? I'm kinda like that now."

"Mhm, I know what you mean. Quite often I am exhausted, but work then keeps me from taking a short powernap. Sleeping peacefully at night is still an issue, to my regret."

"Say, Sats, I really hope your nightmares will stop keeping you awake soon. Last week I already thought you looked overworked, and it really hasn't improved since."

"I hope so as well. Either way, I'm trying."

"Good, good. Take good care of yourself, and don't forget to rest." *Who am I worrying for? Its Sats, she can handle this. I believe in her, she can overcome these nightmares, filled with her past.*

"I won't."

Satsuki's POV:

I'm exhausted, tired beyond imagination. *Okay, take a breath, and continue working. You have a whole lot to attend to today. Also, it will not end with just meetings, as the paper work cannot be regarded as child-play either.*

Slowly, but steadily, I walk over to the familiar mahogany desk. To sign some papers, to drink my tea, to continue reviewing company documents. *Take a deep breath.*

My legs start to feel wobbly, as if they suddenly decide to stop supporting my body. I quickly assess my surroundings on things to grasp, to hold onto. Nothing. The floor seems to move also, sweeping me of my feet. I halt, trying to regain control over the situation. *Take a deep breath, you can handle this.*

Then, my vision went black. Pitch black.

A Peculiar Arrangement

Chapter 12 - A Peculiar Arrangement

A/N:

I was gifted with lots of ideas and inspiration this time, so here's another chapter! Honestly, exams are really boosting my creativity, so the coming weeks are probably more loaded with chapters than the previous ones. It's kinda an avoiding strategy, I guess (he he, extremely guilty). Even so, it's working quite well... so I'll put up with it for a while.

The afternoon sun makes the shadows dance on the schoolyard as the students leave the building one by one. Some are downright exhausted, and have no ability to move themselves in any other way than sloughing and shuffling at a turtle-like pace. Others are more enthusiastic, perhaps in ecstasy by the absence of lessons, perhaps because extra-curricular activities are waiting for them elsewhere. Either way, they are the ones bouncing and skipping on the sandy field beside the school buildings, and they are the ones that the bluenette observes from the window.

Ryūko is partly hanging outside the window, leaning on the windowsill and letting her hair get carried away in the wind. Her elbows are folded onto the aluminic frame as she lazily gazes to the outside, eyeing the leaving high schoolers while enjoying the warmth of the sun rays illuminating her face. That, however, is not the reason she'd stayed behind, though. That was something entirely different.

It had been a shock to her. Her mobile phone, which she actually never uses except for her almost daily phone calls with Satsuki, started ringing loudly during one of her lessons. *That was strange in itself. I mean, very few people know my number.* Excusing herself, apologizing and bowing to the teacher, she quickly left the

classroom. She mumbled somewhere along the line of "it's an emergency call... I'll be right back." In fact, she didn't really know what was going on at all.

The phone number, she didn't recognize. However, put into another perspective, the only numbers that were saved in her phone were Mako's, Sukuyo's and Satsuki's. It didn't come as a surprise to Ryūko, considering all this, albeit she found it strange. *Why would anyone call at this hour? Most people know that I'm having my lectures now, so why? Is it really an emergency?*

Outside the room, a few moments later, Ryūko shook her head. She had to keep her head together, and waste no more time. Bracing herself for the worst, she pressed the dial button.

"Heya, this is Ryūko."

"Good afternoon, Ryūko-san. It's Inumuta Hōka speaking. Do you have a minute?"

"Uh... hi. And, sure. I already walked out of the classroom."

"Ah, of course you still have your lectures to attend to." A familiar rustling noise of fast-typing fingers flying over a keyboard. "But... anyway, I have to tell you something."

"So, out with it." The blue-haired girl became a bit uneasy due to the prospect of bad news. The only person this call could be about was Satsuki, as she was the only one the two of them had in common. And that simple fact unnerved her greatly.

"Satsuki-sama fainted in her office today. She's in the hospital right now."

The dry and uncaring way the computer freak delivered the announcement stirred a feeling of frustration from deep within Ryūko. Also, she still didn't quite progress the two sentences.

"Wha-... How is... Is she?" was all she could utter. *What happened? How is she? Is she okay, injured, or even worse? I don't want to even imagine it, no way.*

"It is nothing serious, she is okay. The rest of the day she will be resting in her hospital room, though. The doctors suspect it is simply a bad case of exhaustion and overworking."

A sigh, definitely one of relief. *She is safe.* "Oh... okay."

"We just thought you should know. Especially Nonon pushed me to call you."

So that pug is good for something. I'm glad. "... thanks anyway, Inumuta."

"No problem."

And that's how Ryūko was still waiting in her classroom. Waiting for Gamagōri to pick her up, as that's how the four Devas arranged it amongst themselves. After that, she would go to her sister. *And then, I'll give her a piece of my mind. This can't go on any longer.*

Satsuki's POV:

Ugh. It is as if my head is pinned down with thousands of needles. I feel pain, but at the same time light-headed and I consistently fail to pinpoint the source of this nuisance. The bed is soft and the blanket embrace me warmly. It's nice to take a nap once in a while...

Bed?

Blankets?

Sleeping?

My eyes fly open in shock of my own realization. *What happened? While trying to recall the events from before, I take in my*

surroundings. The white interior, the pungent smell of disinfectants and sanitizers. Suddenly, it clicked. *Oh, I'm in the hospital.*

Curious as to how I've been transported to this hospital room, and to this building in general, I try to sit upright and see whether I can spot a nurse or doctor. I'm in one of the private rooms after all, so asking a roommate is no option for me. As luck would have it, I'm blessed with the bubbly nurse that, as on cue, walks through the doorstep with a glass of water in her hand.

I try asking, my voice hoarse and feebly. "Excuse me... do you know how I got here?"

"Ah, Satsuki-san, glad to see you're awake. You've been asleep for some hours now."

Some hours? I swiftly turn my head towards the clock I discovered on the wall earlier. That was certainly a bad idea, as I feel a whelm of nausea coming over me upon completing my ninety degree turn. In response, I grab the bedsheets tightly, waiting for the not-so-pleasant moment to ebb away.

The nurse, meanwhile, put the glass of water down at my nightstand and continued. "We heard that you fainted in your office in the early afternoon. A woman named Hōōmaru Rei brought you to the hospital after discovering your seemly lifeless body on the office floor. After running some precautionary tests I am happy to announce nothing is found. It is just a simple case of exhaustion and overworking."

I tried to process the words, but the monologue went too fast for my liking. And my head hurts like crazy, which is not helping me taking in all this information. *Still, I have to thank Hōōmaru later. For bringing me to the hospital, that is. Not that I like being here, on the contrary. When can I leave this place? I really don't like hospitals.*

As if she'd read my mind just now, the friendly woman in hospital uniform added. "We would like to monitor you for a while, in case you faint again due to a lack of well-needed rest. Therefore, you must

remain in this room for the rest of the day and stay in this bed to sleep. Tomorrow morning, you will be the first to go home, Satsuki-san."

I accept in defeat, seeing that me protesting is not going to be effective. I'm tired, and that brown-haired nurse is way more determined. I answer: "... fine. But, is it okay to make some phone calls? I have to inform my company that I'm taking the rest of the day off."

"I believe your colleagues already took care of that, but one phone call I will allow. Then you really have to go to sleep, missy."

I nod as a subconscious response, and after the nurse went away to continue her daily routine while checking on her patients, I grabbed my phone from the nightstand. My slightly shaking fingers type in the speed dial, and I bring the device to my right ear.

Upon hearing a familiar click, I start talking. "Hello, this is Satsuki speaking."

A moment of silence. "Ah, Satsuki-sama. Is everything alright?"

"Nothing to worry about. Anyway, to cut to the case, I want you to do something for me."

"Anything for you, Satsuki-sama, anything."

"Well, you see..."

Ryūko's POV:

"Matoi, shall we go?"

My hands were beginning to run cold. I turn my head towards the voice. "Yeah, let's go quickly."

"No problem, we'll be there in no time."

"... 'kay."

I think back to our conversation of a few moments earlier. Gamagōri held true to his words, as no longer than 15 minutes later we arrived at the immense hospital building Satsuki was in. Its aura gives me the chills, shivers going down my spine. *I really don't like hospitals.*

The for once not overbearing voice of my chauffeur sounded exclusive. "Matoi, I have to stop by a store on the other side of the road. I'll drop you off here... see you later."

"Sure, no probs. Till then." I waved, my hands making some sort of dismissive gesture. *Whatever.*

He looks my way, and I'm not sure what is going on inside his head. *Ah, oops.* I quickly added: "Thanks for the ride, I really appreciate it." It didn't sound that genuine, though, unsurprisingly.

"Well, as I said before, it's no problem at all. It was Nonon's idea after all, and since I was planning to visit Satsuki-sama after duty it takes me no extra effort."

That damn Nonon again. What is she -

Never mind, nothing to wrack my brains over.

I say my goodbye for the second time, and now the giant actually drives away to run his errand. *Finally, off I go. It's time to meet Satsuki.*

Stepping inside, taking the stairs - *the elevator is ever so slow in its way to transfer people from one floor level to another* - and walking through the white-painted corridors. Oh, asking at the reception for Satsuki's whereabouts, walking some more. All in all, after 10 minutes of searching and asking again, getting lost and getting frustrated, I finally enter the right section of the hospital.

The building has some strange logic with the room numbers and different departments with their own expertise, one I cannot follow. Either way, after that dreadful 10 minutes I eye the room number that was given to me by the slightly annoyed receptionist down the hall. *Why do you take such a job if you don't want to answer people's questions anyway?* 4th floor, 5th hallway, 2nd room.

I take a deep breath, and knock on the door. The sound of my door-knocking echoed in the empty corridor. Again, I tried to make myself known. And again, no welcoming invitation is heard.

Ugh, why is she not answering?

Third time's a charm. So it tried to be polite for a third time, waiting for a 'come in' on the wrong side of the door. My patience is running out, though. I'm never one for knocking and mannerisms anyway. *Maybe only 'knocking out', but that has an entirely different ring to it.*

Okay, that it. Not-so-carefully, I slide open the blockage and frantically roam my eyes over the room, searching for that one person I came for. And there she was. Sats. It was not difficult to spot her, as the bed was positioned pontifically in the center of the awfully huge private room.

She was -

Sleeping? Suddenly, I realize why no one answered the knocking on her door. She's dead asleep. Like, really asleep. I mean, my entrance was definitely not a quiet one, but her breathing is still as even and slow as before. Never knew she was such a deep sleeper. *Not that I know much about her in any way. That would be a ridiculous lie.*

I tiptoe to the nearest chair I can find, and soundlessly drop myself onto the seat.

She looks so peaceful when sleeping... I wonder what she's dreaming about.

Wide-legged, my elbow leaning onto my knees, my hands folded underneath my chin, I watched the rising and falling of her chest. It had a calming effect, to be honest, to see her this way. At rest, comfortable, not a care in the world.

And so, time ticked and minutes went by, until the moment I discover this was only the eye of a hurricane. A storm that rages and destroys the peacefulness and quietness and calming ambiance...

In Your Care

Chapter 13 - In Your Care

A/N:

I'm back again with the thirteenth chapter already! Feedback and constructive criticism is always welcome, as it is (still) my very first and only fanfic. Anyway, hope you keep enjoying the read!

Satsuki's POV:

Oh right, I'm still in the hospital. My eyes flicker, my eyelids slightly fluttering upon taking in the brightness of the LED-lamps. Nothing cozy, only clean and clinically appropriate. Please, can someone dim the lights? My pupils gradually adjust themselves, and slowly I regain full access to my vision. Then I purposely stretch my arm to reach for the glass of water on the nightstand.

I was so focused on the act of stilling my thirst, that I was ignorant of everything around me, including other possible presences in the room. That is, until I turned my head towards the right, towards the window and towards the outside world *while I'm trapped inside*.

"... Ryūko?"

My little sister had made herself comfortable in the wooden chair next to my hospital bed. Her pose is somewhat unladylike, albeit very Ryūko-like, wide-legged and leaning forward. Her elbows rested lazily on her knees, her hands wrapped and clogged under her chin while she was dozing off. It must have been not that long ago though, judging the way her eyes were not completely closed yet.

The girl makes no attempt to answer me. I sit more upright, drink the now slightly warmed water and put the glass back onto the

nightstand. I repeat the words, exercising my sleepy throat once again to call out to her.

"Ryūko?"

A twitch. *Cute*. Another one. Then it goes silent again. *Okay, that's it, over is the nice little nap*. My arm now reaches for the sleeping girl and I gently nudge her shoulder. While doing so, I softly whisper her name, in the hope she will wake up and tell me about her day. I have always believed she would come for me, after all.

It turned out a bad idea, the nudging and forceless pushing. At some moment Ryūko's left hand shifted from under her chin, thereby slamming away one of her leaning pillars, causing her head to submit to gravity. I immediately retracted my hand from the crime scene, thinking about feigning ignorance and pretending to sleep. *Well, that certainly wouldn't work, as no one else is here beside me. I would be the primary suspect anyway, so I will have to face it head-on.*

Ryūko, in the meantime, shook awake by the sudden movement of her own head. She exclaimed something along the line of "Shi... what the... huh?". I don't remember the exact words, but she was definitely at a loss for words and disoriented due to her sleepy state of mind.

Then, she noticed me, being awake and all, and in a flash she sat upright. I inwardly chuckle upon seeing being conscious of her own slumped position. That, an her intrinsic drive to look more dignified in front of her family. *Me, her sister*. She should not be that on-edge though. I want no such border to lie in-between us. A bit more freely, a bit more familiar. *That would be nice*.

"... Sats? Ah, you awake?" Sheepishly she rubs her right cheek, which is a bit reddish through her recent napping. I thinks it is adorable, though she will never admit this fact. *She's just like that*. "I am, just now. How long have you been sitting here? Are you cold,

hungry?" *Were you concerned or worried about me?* Of course, that I am not going to ask. I am just curious, that is all.

"Nah, not really. Can't get cold either, y'know... Life Fibers and such." She shrugs, grins.

"Right, I suppose that is true." I smile back, encouraging her to start a conservation.

"So, how are you feeling?"

My smile widens even more. *Is that concern I am hearing in her voice?*

Thank you, Ryūko.

"So, the underachiever is inside?"

"Unfortunately, yes. She is."

"Ah, come on. It's not unfortunate at all, at least to Satsuki-sama."

"Is that so?"

"Yep, she is really encouraging and trying to be a nice big sister. The und-... I mean, Ryūko is also warming up to her. She already bought a present for Satsuki-sama's birthday."

"I also believe Ryūko isn't that bad. I mean, she was reliable enough to free us from those uncontrollable Life Fibers after all."

"True that Hōka, I agree."

"I am still doubting her though. That stubborn and careless attitude of hers is bothering me."

"You are damn stubborn yourself, Sanageyama."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not."

"See, told you so."

"Hey, that is not fai-"

"Guys, can you please be quiet?"

"When are we allowed to go inside? Did Satsuki mention anything to you?"

"Not really, but I think we should wait here. For their sake."

"Yea, let's give them some privacy."

"Okay, if you say so. But I'm not gonna trust her any time soon. That temper..."

"Sanage-"

"AAAAAAnyway, let's go grab a bite, shall we? I'm STARVING!"

"Now, that sounds like a fantastic idea. I'm in!"

"... only if we go eat hamburgers."

"Just shut up and follow us, Sanageyama."

"Jeez."

"So?"

"... sure."

Ryūko's POV:

"So, how are you feeling?" I ask Sats, seeing her awake right in front of me. Honestly, I don't know when I had started to doze off, but I really didn't notice her calling out to me. Like, at all. School was as energy-draining as always, so that must be the reason. Boredom causes tiredness, I guess.

From the corner of my eye I see her smile broadening which lights up a happy feeling inside me. *She definitely looks a lot better than a few days ago. What some hours of sleep can achieve...*

Patiently I await her response. That came seconds later, and from the slightly hoarse voice it became apparent that she had slept quite some while. Well, if she did not sleep after that stunt she pulled today, I would kick her to her bed. Personally. *You went too far, Sats.*

"I'm fine, really. Those few hours of sleep did wonders." She looks me square in the eye, her irises emitting a strange aura of solemnness and delight.

"Good to hear, Sats. I'm really glad." I am. At least it's nothing serious, but that I knew already. Confirming it with my own eyes is a whole other story.

Still, she really went too far this time. As an older sister, *my older sister*, she should have taken better care of herself. Any human being should do that, at all times. No, Sats just *fucking randomly* decided she does not apply to the rules, working herself to the bone, neglecting herself till that behaviour took its toll. The consequences? Ending up in the hospital, worrying those around her. *Who does she think she is?*

Following that train of thought made me go down a road I did not want to be on. One of negativity. Still, I couldn't resist lecturing my sister. Logically speaking, she should know what she did wrong. Just like that, I justified my own urges and downright told her.

"Why did you do that?" *Do you not value your own life? Are you that selfish?*

"Wha-... What are you talking about?" *Does she really not know? Are you that ignorant?*

"Why did you faint? Why did you neglect yourself? Why did you end up here?" *I hate hospitals.*

The silence was deafening. I realize my bold line of questioning must have surprised my sister. *That was just as fucking random, Ryūko.* Still, I was curious and secretly a bit afraid. What if I crossed another forbidden line, what if I went too far myself? *I don't want to find out. But then again, I still want to know. Why did you do that, Sats?*

The figurative crickets were chirping. A strong summer breeze we could hear, howling past the hospital building, real-life, while seconds ticked away.

"Well, I didn't actually ask to be here either. I didn't want to faint either. And I certainly didn't mean to get myself such an extreme case of sleep deprivation. It just happened." Her walls had been put up again, taking a defensive stance. Her eyes were still open and inviting, though.

That's just bullshit Sats, I don't buy it. And so, I keep on attacking her, pressing the subject a little further. "You couldn't sleep, huh?... so how did you manage to nap this peacefully just now? Sounds a bit hypocritical, don't you think?"

The following words from Sats were coated with frustration and disappointment. "Can't you just believe me on my words, Ryūko?" The outburst was sudden, but perhaps not so sudden.

Can I trust her? For a second, I am thrown off guard. *Can I believe her?* The phone conversations from the previous days I unconsciously repeat in my head, recalling the honesty that Sats radiated, the uncertainty, the reluctance. And then the way she

decided to reveal one of her most kept secret. Just like that. *I'm foolish, am I?*

The back-and-forth game we were playing the very minute Sats awoke from her desperately needed sleep was pitiful, I discover. I kept attacking, she kept defending. Why did I do that? I did not come here to throw a fit, like a spoiled brat. Yes, I wanted to tell her off, but not to this extent.

Be honest, Ryūko. Surprisingly, I hear my own voice stumbling and struggling to get a grip. "M-Maybe. I'm just... I'm just angry. Or disappointed? I don't freaking know anymore."

It seems Sats came back to Earth as well. "So, what did you expect me to do?"

Again, I am perplexed by her question. *Heck, I don't know what I wanted her to do. I don't know what I expected, what she should have done to prevent this from happening. I'm just clueless.* Clumsily, and (probably) visibly baffled, I stared at her. I realized it mere moments later, though, claying my own facial expression back into one of seriousness.

"You want me to be honest, Sats?"

"Always." *That's why I'm trying so hard.*

"You should have told me. Like, being honest about the fact that you could not handle it anymore."

I could practically see the cogs turning in Sats' head. *What is she thinking about?* Meanwhile, I repositioned myself on the hard and lean wooden chair, crossing my arms and stretching my neck with some relieving cracks.

Then, suddenly, she seemed to have an answer. "And what would you have done about it?"

I know. "Let's see... I probably would have assisted you somehow . Like, helped you or, I don't know, talked to you more often. Everything is better than wasting time a hospital, don't ya think?"

"... yes. I really detest hospitals, Ryūko." She sounded almost weak, vulnerable. So *unlike Sats*.

"Me too."

"So, what you do you say?"

"I am not sure I follow you... wha-"

"You, me, the Mankanshoku's. The nearest beach. Next Saturday afternoon."

"Seriously? I am not sure if it fits in my schedule-"

"Then make time, 'cuz I'm ordering you."

"I can't just abandon everything and-"

"Yes, you can. Otherwise I'll drag you from that stupid company to the beach."

"..."

"I'm sure that won't be a pretty sight, though. The oh-so mighty Kiryūin Satsuki sucking sand because she wouldn't listen to her *little sister*. That would be such a great front-page headline."

"Still, even if I decide to surrender, I prefer going to another place. The beach is a bit..."

"First of all, there's no such thing as surrendering. You're going on your own free will, it shouldn't be obligation to join us on this supernice trip!"

"But just now, you said-"

"Okay, okay, lemme rephrase. I really want you to come with us, and I really think it is good for you to get some rest once in a while. I'm not gonna push you to do it, though."

"..."

"Still, I don't want a repeat of what happened today. Don't ya ever forget that, Sats."

"I'm not aiming to end up in the hospital again either. Still..."

"What's holding you back? Beaches are sunny, warm and relaxing. I think that's exactly what you need."

"..."

"Just say yes, Sats."

"... maybe."

Lingering Ties

Chapter 14 - Lingering Ties

A/N:

Whoop, whoop, I'm back again with another chapter! Hope you enjoy the read once again!

To be honest, I was not quite sure how to continue with the story, as it turns out to be a lot more difficult to keep track of all the storylines without making the fanfic too chaotic and unrealistic. Also, I was not really planning to make this a 100-chapter piece of writing, so I'm now thinking carefully about how to tie the ends nicely, without going too directly towards a happy-ending story. I always hate that kind of thing, it makes stories kinda predictable and boring. Hopefully, this one will not...

Ryūko's POV:

In the end, I couldn't overturn Sats' decision to avoid the beach at all costs. Which was a pity, because I was almost craving to feel the sand in-between my toes and let my hair get carried away in a cool sea breeze. Eating ice cream and lazily flowing onto the salty seawater surface. Sun tanning while chatting away with the Mankanshoku's and catching up with Satsuki. *Nope, ain't gonna happen. Not this Saturday, and maybe never.*

Still, I have no clue why she so dead set against it. Persuasion did not work, kindly asking failed to do the job. Group pressure had not been not effective either, but I saw that coming long time. Sats isn't swayed that easily, and will always be brimmed with determination. However, this amount of rejection and dismissal I could not handle. It had been a losing game all along, for me at least.

Anyway, the good side of the story was that she did not completely turn down my sincere offer. My sister was willing to take the day off and enjoy the Saturday afternoon together with me and the Mankanshoku's. She just was not going to the beach, that's all. *If... I wanted to see her out of her comfort zone for once. But then again, she still keeps her walls up. Are you going to let me in sometime soon?*

So how did we end up here? I look around, taking in my surroundings. It is now that semi-dreaded Saturday afternoon, and my back is nicely being warmed by the overly present sunrays. I welcomed them, that was not the issue. I mean, the weather is fantastic, *great for having a day out to beach*. So how did we end up here?

Behind me I hear the hustle and bustle that is inherent that to the Mankanshoku's, with Bazarō-san and Matarō secretly discussing, probably about something perverted again, and Sukuyo humming while incomprehensively preparing some snacks. Mako sits beside me, babbling her usual cheery monologue, only half of it actually reaching my ears. *Jup, genuinely listening is a thing apart.*

"Ne, ne, Satsuki-sama, what do you think? Should I do it or not?" Mako is chirping happily, albeit a bit nervously, and questioningly to the girl sitting opposite of her. *Oh, she's here too.*

So how did I end up here? That was a spur of the moment thing, for which the crucial role was credited to Sukuyo-san, as she basically came up the idea and the inspiration and the drive the organize this whole set-up. And that is why we are now here, in a park, on a ultra large blanket, which was partly positioned in the much cooler shadows. I'm, of course, sitting on the other side, such that I can still get my sun tan. *All while reminiscing about what could have been.*

In the meantime, my sister responds to Mako's train of question, just like always, in a calm and fully confident manner. "Well, I am not sure whether my advice is one you should take into consideration,

but I believe you should do it. It is not as if there is any reason not to do it."

I totally wasn't up to date with the conversation, I realize, as I had no idea what they were talking about. What was Mako going to do? *And why is she seeking Sats' advice? They hardly know each other. No, no, wait. Why should I question that at all? Why should I care about that? They should do whatever they want. It's definitely not my business, and not my duty to mingle in their affairs.*

Suddenly, Mako turned towards me. *The hell, what-?* The answer came soon enough. "So, what do you think, Ryūko-chan?" *Eh?!* And in a flash of a second, I found myself in deep trouble.

What shall I do?

Option one. I confess to Mako the fact that I haven't paid any attention to the rambling and chatting she did, with all consequences that follow from this plan of action. *I really don't want to imagine that, not in the slightest.* No, a wailing Mako is not something you want to experience ever so often. In fact, I believe I already reached my quota for the next three decennia.

Option two. I pretend that I totally followed the whole monologue and answer Mako with a straight poker face. Well... I'm not sure if I'm capable of doing so. Senketsu often called me an 'open book' after all. *Senketsu did.* But you won't know the outcome until you try it, like, real-time, right?

That's why I decided to go for the latter course of action. I replied pretentiously and half-seriously: "Uhm, yeah. I think you should do it as well. Uhm... so, that's.... I totally agree with Sats!"

Upon hearing myself like that, I inwardly cringe. *That for sure did not sound convincing. At all.* This feeling is amplified by the intense but amused and knowing gaze I received from Sats. *Great, it couldn't get any better.*

"Okidoki! Thanks! You and Satsuki-sama really-really helped me with your super positive pep-talk! Now I'm totally ready to confront Ira-san!" The tiny brunette practically bounced while shouting, all while balling her firsts and sitting cross-legged on the blanket Sukuyo-san laid out for us.

On the one hand, I am more than delighted about the fact Mako is such a dense girl. Honestly, I am, more than ever before, especially now that I made the mistake of not paying attention. *Thank you, Mako, for being yourself.* Sats, on the other hand, is not going to have any of that, judging from her piercing, prying eyes.

A sugar sweet voice I then heard momentarily, sounding a bit further away than my previous chit-chat. It was Sukuyo-san, sing-songing to us in her usual cheery manner. "Girls, could one of you go and fetch some cool drinks? Then we can all sit together and enjoy the croquettes I made."

My first thing flashing through my mind was the pure heavenly aroma and taste of Sukuyo-san's mystery croquettes, but that ebbed away quickly. First things first. This was my chance to escape from Sats' silent cross-examination without being too suspicious.

In a smooth motion, as if on cue, my hand shoots in the air. I smile, innocently believing all problems will be solved by this act. "I will go, Sukuyo-san! What do you all want to drink?"

Then, I quickly memorized the exclaimed answers and took my leave. That is, without realizing Sats excused herself as well and started her pursuit. I would discover this only moments later, at the vending machine just outside the park, seeing my sister standing behind me with a knowing grin and arms crossed, giving off an air of confidence and determination.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

Oh no, mission failed.

Satsuki's somewhat shorter hair smoothly waved in the summer breeze, making it seem like the ocean itself, with the locks representing the ripples in the water surface. With a peaceful composure she steps towards the vending machine, leaning on the device with her arms crossed. Her eyes, however, never left the younger girl who looked shocked upon hearing the older girl's distinctive voice. Another emotion, one which Satsuki could not decipher, was outright displayed on Ryūko's face. Disappointment? Anger? Surprise? She did not know.

"Sa-Sats?! What are you doing here? Really, I'm only fetching some drinks for us all, so I'll be back in a minute." *Please, just go back to the Mankanshoku's. I wanted to flee from you.*

A soft chuckle. The older girl thereafter cleared her throat in a strangely dignified way, her right hand covered her lips for a bit. "I'll join you then, if you don't mind."

Ryūko's head perked up at that comment. She understood then that no declination was accepted, though her sister made it seem like there was. No, on the contrary, this talk was inevitable, and could not be dodged or evaded or avoided. The bluenette had no choice but to face this situation head-on. *Unfortunately.*

"Okay then, sure." She answered in response, in defeat.

"So, what were you thinking about? You were completely lost in thought back there, weren't you?"

You already know the answer, Sats. "Uh, yes... I was. I still can't wrap my head around the fact you didn't want to join us to the beach. And now we're stuck in a park with such a sea-suitable weather. Reality was downing on me, I guess." Sheepishly, the younger girl ran a hand through her wild locks, slightly embarrassed by her own honest reply.

"Ah, that. I'm sorry, Ryūko. I just... I just really can't."

"But why though. Why are you so dead-set and completely 100% against the idea? I don't understand."

"..." The older girl was speechless. Ryūko did not know whether she was still contemplating her answer, or that she was purposely not trying to answer. She decided to push further.

"You tell me, Sats."

Take it slow, take baby steps, because it's still a way of going forward. With that message in mind Satsuki made an attempt to earnestly formulate her reasons. That's what Ryūko deserves, after all.

In the meantime, the traffic whizz past the two sisters, indicating the rush hour is slowly reaching its climax. In particular, a red motorcycle skillfully maneuvered around the now slowing cars, the rider revealing a prominent red mohawk matching the bike's colour. The rest of his hair is black, which matches the tough guy's attire. He glances to his right, gaining the familiar vision of two dark-blue haired girls, one of which is adorned with a red streak. He shakes his head knowingly, sighs, and continues his way through the traffic jam, like a true guerilla.

Satsuki, on her part, takes a deep breath. *Go on and get yourself together. No more hesitation, no more seconds of silence.* "It has to do with multiple reasons, in fact."

Another deep, but now shaky breath. "First and foremost, I was not sure what to do. I've never been to the beach for leisure, for fun." *It does sound silly when I say it out loud. Who am I fooling?*

That same thought ran through the other girl's head, all while immediately exclaiming: "But that should not be the problem! We could-"

But she was interrupted, quite forcefully. "The other reason being that I am disgusted with my own body. I know we all were scarcely

dressed in our battle against the Life Fibers, dossed in the few square centimeters that we called our Kamui, but even considering that... I don't want to expose myself in that way anymore. Never again."

"Wha-"

"Our Mother put scars on me, Ryūko. More than you could even imagine. Some are recent, some date back to a decennium ago, but all of them still present. Painting my body in a way that makes me feel disgusted and repulsive of myself. And that sucks, honestly."

There was nothing the younger sister could utter. None at all.

"What is taking my girls so long?"

"Eh, you were saying something, Dear?"

"Matarō, be quiet for a sec!"

"Okay, Mom."

"So, like I said, what is taking them so long?"

"Why are you asking us? We were also here the whole time, so how should we know?"

"Yeah, Mom, why should we know?!"

"Ah, sorry guys, you are absolutely right. Is it alright if I go take a look, trying to find them? It has been 20 minutes since they left. Mako's sleeping in the sun, so look after her for me, will you?"

"Ah, yes of course... we will guard the croquettes, uh oh, and the rest of our belongings!"

"Jup, you can could on us, Mom! I'll watch sis as well!"

"Those are my brilliant and brave men... well, I'm on my way!"

Satsuki's POV:

I don't know how long I've been standing here. Alone, leaning against the vending machine. What I'm feeling? Emptiness, probably. I don't feel anything anymore.

"Satsuki-chan, is that you? Why are you alone? Where is Ryūko-chan?"

I look around me, almost in a daze. *I don't know.*

In Too Deep

Chapter 15 - In Too Deep

A/N:

AAAANNDD I'm back again. It's been a hectic one and a half week, as I started with my bachelor thesis and all, so apologies for the late update. But anyway, the next chapter is finished! Though it is a bit on the short side, I thought it would be better this way, with some drama and somewhat psychological development ensuing in this chapter. Hope you enjoy reading it, as always!

Satsuki's POV:

"Satsuki-chan, is that you? Why are you alone? Where is Ryūko-chan?"

I look around me, almost in a daze. *I don't know.*

Then I start tracing back the events from moments ago. What happened just now? Why am I alone, indeed? No need for thinking: I know the answers already. The only one to blame would be me. Me and me alone. *Without a doubt, it's my fault. I snapped, for sure.*

A few minutes ago I was still together with my little sister. It is a sunny summer day, a Saturday, and we were enjoying a fantastic quality time together. The nearest park from the Mankanshoku's home was highly suitable for relaxing and chatting away. And then it happened. Ryūko was buying the Mankanshoku family something to drink, and I was leaning against the vending machine. *I was just curious, that's all.*

Really, it was an innocent act from my side, just being concerned about the daze Ryūko drowned herself in. And being myself, I wanted to get to the bottom of that, investigating the cause of the

distraction and make it all better. I really did not know it would come to this. Frankly, I should not complain at all. She was being honest, I was being honest. Ryūko was not to blame. That, I was painfully aware of.

"Our Mother put scars on me, Ryūko. More than you could even imagine. Some are recent, some date back to a decennium ago, but all of them still present. Painting my body in a way that makes me feel disgusted and repulsive of myself. And that sucks, honestly."

Was I too honest? No, I still believe it was something that had to be done. I don't think anybody took notice of my scars before, both old and recent, both physically and emotionally. Anyhow, that's why I had no other choice. Tell her about my past, the one thing that I dreaded to do so far, was the direction I choose to go on. The result? A concerned Sukuyo-san, a vanished Ryūko, and me still processing the recent events.

The whole peacefulness and relaxation that engulfed this Saturday had disappeared in an instance. It must have shocked Ryūko. My outburst, the dangerous gleam in my eyes, the unmistakable, absolute truth. Otherwise, why else would she have fled from the scene? I'm definitely the only one to blame. *I'm sorry this is all our family is worth. As for me, a burden is a more suitable word.*

Oh, right. In a stiff motion, my torso pushed itself to face Sukuyo-san. Our gazes met and I was welcomed with a warm and open demeanor. That did not soothe my worries and numbness, though. My voice, a bit hoarse and shaken, struggled to leave my throat. It happened anyway. "Uhm, Sukuyo-san. I'm afraid Ryūko disappeared. All because I messed up... I-"

The hand that warmly settled itself onto my shoulder was a gesture I didn't expect. When my gaze met Sukuyo-san's, only gentleness lingered in her eyes. The brown-haired woman softly smiled at me, and I could not help letting my thoughts drift away. *She is such a nice woman, and a wonderful family for Ryūko. On the contrary, I...*

She interrupted my mental rambling with a soft whisper. "It's okay, Satsuki-chan, it's okay." She patted that same shoulder a couple times, which made me relax somehow, I realized later. *How does she do it?* Her sweet voice reached out again. "Shall we search for that troublesome sister of yours, mhm? Lemme check with the others, then we can leave right away."

I nod, the only motion I could manage at that moment. At hindsight, I'm not sure whether this plan is going to work. In fact, I don't believe Ryūko would be thrilled to see me, not at all. Still, I'm refusing to let our built-up relationship go to waste. *It was going so well for us. Finally, after all those years, I truly looked forward to seeing my family.*

That's why I followed the Mankanshoku matriarch to the city center, with one goal in mind. One aim to achieve within the smallest timeframe possible. I need to find her. Really, because I have to talk it out, nice and softly. Encouragingly, consoling, and open for questions. I decided.

"Let's go, Sukuyo-san. I need to speak with my sister."

The sun was already beginning to hide herself between the skyline of Honnō City when Ryūko stopped running. It had been a long time since her hasty departure, but she was only now starting to feel beyond tired. Eventually her legs must have given up, as her fast running pace transited into a slow walk. Breathing was difficult and took more energy than usual, while the adrenaline level was sinking to a record value. *It hurts so much.*

If only Senketsu was here. If only he was still on the godforsaken planet, he would have told me how to deal with this situation. This particular thought popped up randomly upon slowing down, which Ryūko found strange and depressing at the same time. Sadly, in the real world, things don't happen this way. *If only...* The bluenette slowed down, letting herself crash onto the nearest brick wall. Her

knees failed as she sunk into her newfound leaning aid. *I screwed up again. Jep, once more, I messed up.*

Now, when reality is dawning in, Ryūko sighs and defeatedly bumps the back of her head against the wall. Another sigh. The sky is colouring a spectra of orange and red, its palette interrupted by the clouds that drift by in a relaxing fashion. Her mind is fogged as well, not quite realizing what has occurred moments ago, before everything went south.

"... -okay?" *Huh, what?* She barely registered the word. *Focus, Ryūko.* Slowly, she regained sense of her direct surroundings. The traffic, now much less frequent than before, rushed past the squatting girl. Pedestrians maneuvered around her, while shops were closing one by one, turning off their flashy lights and shut their doors with an audible thud.

"HEY!" *Is someone talking to me?* Ryūko turns her attention towards the loud and brash voice.

"Matoi, you okay?"

The voice belongs to Tsumugu Kinagase, dossed in his complete travelling attire, comfortably sitting on his two-wheeled vehicle, both of his arms loosely holding the steering wheel. The girl's eyes widen a bit, not expecting his accompany here, *of all fucking places*. With arms crossed, she looks the mohawk guy square in the eye.

"Not really. But what of it? What is it to you?" *It's none of your business, Tsumugu.*

He does not bat an eyelash, no emotion showing on his stern face upon hearing the sneer from the young girl. A knowing grin and a piercing gaze are the only signal emitted to Ryūko, who was busier being annoyed with the other presence than actually noticing the triumphant change in behaviour.

"Family struggles? Saw you at the park with the Kiryūin girl, by the way."

A mumble. "Why asking when you already know the answer? Fuck off, you nude creep."

"Okay, let bygones be bygones... that was not necessary, Matoi. Lemme tell you, you better make up with your sister or whatever is wrong with you two. Just do it, for everyone's sake."

"..." If her eyes could shoot lasers, the motor rider would have been pierced in a fraction of a second. She remains deadly silent though.

"I mean, nobody is waiting for your family quarrel, to be honest. Guessing from both your personalities, you will do a lot more damage than you initially intended... to your surroundings, and especially to the people around you." He shrugs, showing his indifference about the matter. For him, it was the first time since the Life Fiber domination that he had seen the two sisters, actually. *They never fail to amuse me, though. So similar...*

She, on the other hand, replies fiercely: "Still, what's it to you ? And don't you think I know that... jeez, ya being a freaking busybody." Her right hand runs through her unruly locks, showing her frustration openly and perhaps unknowingly as well. She was and will always wear her emotions on her sleeve. *Just like Senketsu often told me.*

The tough listener repositions himself on his motorcycle, turning a bit more towards the moping girl. He literally could see the frustration dripping from the girl's stance and gestures, as if she held all the answers all herself, but failed to admit or even considered the positive roads that could be taken. She doomed herself through the course of her actions, and made the verdict even before the trial had even began. Recognizing this pattern all too well, his gaze then climbed up to the sky. Upon viewing the evening sky and its warm ambiance, he sighs.

"If I may give you a piece of advice, it's better to talk it out with her soon. Before it is too late, that is... I know that all too well, to my biggest regret."

With this comment, the blue-haired girl looks up and straight into the penetrant glare the man is giving her. She shrinks visibly upon sensing his determination, but recovers in a matter of milliseconds. Her eyes, first exasperated and provoked, turned softer with hints of sympathy and recognition. *Indeed, even I came to know about his background. Quite a tragic story, really.*

He continues. "To be honest, I think having a sister is a treasure. A precious person you must cherish, as she will be the one that cares for you the most. Like, for the smallest of things, the littlest of actions, she will be there for you."

"..."

"Though, I'm not sure 'bout Kiryūin of course. I'm talking 'bout my own experiences, obviously."

"... I-"

"What happened anyway? From what I know and heard from others, she cares for you a great deal. But she's extremely cautious, conscious and what not. "

"... I know."

"So, why are you here?"

"..."

"Why, Matoi?"

She snapped, bursting out all of her pent up feelings. "'Cuz I was stupid! I ran away after Sats poured out all her feelings to me. She was showing me her honesty when I was the only fucking one that asked for it... and once I heard her reasons, I could not handle

them." The girl let out a deep sigh, remembering her black out from before.

"Hmmm, not so wise, indeed."

A growl, strikingly similar to an angry bulldog. "Don't lecture me, punky."

"Lemme ask you a question, Matoi... no, Ryūko. How do you want your relationship with your sister to be? How close, I mean."

How close? Hell, I never think about the long term. Sats is my family, period. But then, I have the Mankanshoku's caring for me as well. Do I truly see her as my sister? As a family member? What are Mako, Sukuyo-san, Bazarō-san, Matarō and Guts to me? Her head tilted slightly, looking at Tsumugu questioningly, not really sure how to phrase her inner turmoil.

Her advisor looks momentarily on his watch, which is securely clipped onto his wrist. He sighs, deciding to add more to his cross-examination, spicing it up a little further. "My sister and I once were so close, that sharing our secrets and inner struggles became a habit. She shared hers, I shared mine. If you want to build a close sisterly bond, that's a thing you must be prepared to do."

And with that, he steadies himself on his motorcycle, and starts the engine with a downwards kick. Time is running out, so it leaves him no choice but to abruptly cut off the conversation. The next appointment is waiting for him as well. Therefore, a short and curt 'goodbye' is said, and gone was the mohawk man.

Meanwhile, Ryūko was left confused but inwardly grateful for the valuable words. She darted her eyes to the sky, observing the clouds and the warmly coloured sky. *Thank you, Tsumugu.*

Encouraging Words

Chapter 16 - Encouraging Words

A/N:

To K2-Black-Panther: Glad you like the implementation of your request! I really wanted to somehow integrate your ideas into the story, but not deviate from my own ideas too much. And then suddenly I found a suitable, perfect way to do so! It turned out better than I expected, but it's always nice to hear positive feedback coming my way...

Anyway, today I had a bunch of inspiration to write and finalize this next chapter, so here it is! Keep enjoying the read, and whenever you feel like it, review, follow and like this story to your heart's content ;) Critique is welcome as well, as long as it is moderate and/or constructive!

"Ryūko!"

"RYUUUKOOO-CHAAAN!"

"Where on Earth could she be..." Satsuki ran her hand frustratingly through her middle-length dark blue hair, while the girl frantically searched the crowd for- "Ryūko!"

Her brown-haired companion had no luck either, as she shouted and plugged away at finding the familiar red streaked bluenette. Defeated and exhausted, she eventually slumped towards the older sister, who was still busy trying to recognize this similar face to hers in the moving sea of people.

A warm hand on Satsuki's shoulder made her jump a few centimeters, visibly shocked by the sudden physical contact. "Satsuki-chan..." The middle-aged woman huffed a bit to regain her

breathing. "Maybe we should split up? Would that work?" Another deep inhalation. "I don't think we are going to find her anytime soon... like, she is SOOOO quick on her feet."

Inhumanly fast, that she is indeed. The girl contemplated on what to say. Splitting up would be more efficient, but honestly, the chances were not going to increase by searching separately. The city, she figured, is huge and the number of little back streets, sheltered places and hiding locations is countless. In other words, an impossible task either way. *Think Satsuki, think. Where could Ryūko have gone to? Where would I have gone, if I were her?*

Realization downed upon her. *Well, what do I know about her? Especially on that aspect, I'm clueless. Our conversations were mostly superficial, our revelations were mostly about the past. The current Ryūko I know very little off. What does she like? What makes her happy and content, except for the Mankanshoku's, Senketsu and her bike? I'm clueless, and a failure as a sister.*

She hid her face in her hands, and sank to the ground. A shaky sigh immersed above the traffic bustle and background chattering. "I'm a failure..." she whispered to no one in particular.

One person heard the downright self-accusation crystal clear. Never had Sukuyo seen the always determined and head-strong girl degraded to such a vulnerable and desperate state. It's certainly a first, but that does not mean she wants to see it more often. No, on the contrary, she felt for the girl. *Poor Satsuki-chan...*

Of course, the woman did not know the whole story from her past, her dark and traumatic childhood, but she could image that much upon observing and having heard the small talks between Satsuki and her deceased Mother, Ragyō. She is well aware of the fact Satsuki is a strong girl, however, one could keep such a façade forever. And at this very moment, in this very situation, the girl was showing her real, chronological age for the first time. *She is not even twenty and yet she has to carry the whole world on her shoulders.*

Share the burden her family left her as a parting gift. Poor Ryūko-chan and Satsuki-chan...

A dismissive hum. "Satsuki-chan, dear, you ARE NOT a failure." She crouched down as well, seeing eye-to-eye with the depressed sister. Continuing, she firmly stated: "You are the best sister Ryūko-chan could ever wish for."

Satsuki looked up, seemly confused about this statement. "But—"

The retort was waved aside as quickly as she uttered that one word, since Sukuyo interfered abruptly. "Look at you! You are a beautiful, smart, strong, caring AND, last but not least, honest girl. One that this run-away sister of yours admires very much, even though she will never admit this fact."

The brunette smiled gently at the teary-eyed girl, stroking her blue locks in a maternal fashion. Her attempts to calm the distressed girl worked slightly, as Satsuki put her hands down and turned her attention towards Sukuyo. She looked as if she did not believe the words the woman had spoken a few moments earlier. As if she could not fathom her sister having any kind of affectionate feelings for her.

"Satsuki-chan, you ARE a good sister to Ryūko-chan, and she KNOWS that as well. You worry about and care for each other, but you talk far too little." A disproving glare was given to the still squatting girl, conveying the message that improvements could definitely be made between the two sisters. *Starting from today.*

Satsuki, on the other hand, slowly regained her confident nature and fearless determination through the pep talk. Together, they stood up with only Sukuyo stretching her limps momentarily to ease her muscles. Satsuki remained dignified as ever, pretending she had never been that hopeless ball of misery from just before. With resolution dripping from her words, she said: "I suppose your right, Sukuyo-san. Shall we continue our search, then? It's getting dark, and I really have to patch up with my sister."

The woman's smile broadened upon hearing the suggestion from the bluenette. Her persuasion had its desired effect, and she could not help beaming at the sight of the girl. She was now brimming with confidence, and out to mend this uncertain relation with her sister. *A sisterly bond with Ryūko-chan, this stubborn girl whom I've grown to love like my own flesh and blood. And Satsuki-chan, the lonely girl, who is worming a way into my heart as well.*

A last touch, with Sukuyo cupping Satsuki's chin lovingly. "Sounds like a plan, dear. Now... where do you suggest we go to?" Her hand subsequently moved to her side again, gesturing she was ready to depart once again.

However, they did not immediately take their leave. Not before the older sister thanked the woman who was making her experience emotions she haven't felt before. "Thank you, Sukuyo-san. For everything, for pushing me back into shape. I needed it, honestly." She looked down, her eyes filled with gratitude. A soft and almost shy smile was plastered on her face.

"Don't mention it. For you two, who are like my own children, I would do much more than that. It's what you sisters deserve... a nice family together." Another reassuring smile reached the teenager.

Satsuki's smile widened even further upon listening to the middle-aged woman's words. She could hear the honesty and truthfulness in her speech, thereby confirming her previous thoughts. *The Mankanshoku's are really like a family to Ryūko. She is well taken care of, my little sister.*

Their eyes met and spoke a million words. *Thank you, Sukuyo-san.*

Ryūko's POV:

My abnormal breathing is the only thing I hear clearly. Honestly, this annoying ring in my ears goes as far as overpowering the sound of the evening traffic. My heart is thudding loudly in my chest, its sound

mingling together with my non-rhythmic respiration. Lastly, the drum of my descending feet put themselves in the mix as I am running as fast as I am able to. All while I keep wondering. *Where did I end up again? How do I get back to the park?*

I try to trance back my memories of my escape while I turn left and right randomly each time I encounter an intersection. As I run, I observe, some weird-looking and surprised glances from bystanders are shot my way. It is as if those people cannot image someone doing a makeshift marathon, or at least having the energy to do so. For me, it's a whole other story. *I just want to get back to the park as quickly as possible. Back to Satsuki, whom I left alone in her shocked and vulnerable state. What an idiot you are, Ryūko.*

Left.

Right.

Right.

Maneuvering past everyone who stands in my way, I stumble upon more and more people as I enter the busier part of town. Slowly and surely I start to recognize some cross-sections and shops from when I desperately ran from it all. *I'm such an idiot, I really am.*

It's getting dark, I discover. To be frank, I don't know how long I've been moping, talking to Tsumugu and disgustingly self-pitying myself. It must have been for a few hours though, seeing that the sun starts to hide herself behind the taller buildings of Honnō. *Shit, you have to go faster.*

"Think, Ryūko, think. Where is the park again?" I whisper to herself. For a second I interrupt my own running pace to slow down and spend more time thinking. Wandering relentlessly would lead me nowhere, so for once I decided I really have to wreck my brains. Walking seemed to be the better solution, so that's what I started doing. Walking.

And that really seems to work, as I am continuing to recognize more and more of my surroundings. The sporadic trees on the side of the road, the signs of various eating stands, the positioning of the traffic lights. It all feels familiar to me, as if I've actually been here before. *Of course I was here before. But the most important question remains... where's Satsuki?*

Ah, at least I am able to come back here again. The much dreaded but famed venting machine, the crime scene from where I fled. The square-shaped device comes into view after I turned around what seems to be the hundredth corner. I stepped onto the crosswalk, leading myself and my tired body towards this particular place. Satsuki is nowhere to be seen, *of course*, and the resting spot suddenly embodies emptiness and absence. *Heck, this is where everything went south.*

Playing back the events from a couple hours ago, I feel myself getting lost in thought, drowning in the misery and guilt and what-ifs. It is similar to riding a rollercoaster of emotions, really. However, unlike such a rollercoaster experience, solely downs and no ups were etched in my mind. *I'm regretting every fucking action I undertook. Tsumugu was right. Senketsu was once right. I completely messed up again.*

From a faraway distance, muffled shouts reaches my ears, seemly exclaiming my name in a strange unison. I swear I know those voices. Me being this daydreaming mess, however, could not pinpoint the where and who. These persons, whoever they may be, are practically screaming their lungs out. In the meantime, my hands grab the vending machine tightly, concentrating on the unknown yet familiar voices.

"... Ryūko!" The firm tone becomes increasingly clear. *I swear I know her voice...*

I start looking around, hoping to find out where the sounds are coming from. As usual, I fail to see or gain clear vision of them either way. Lucky as I am, the source keeps coming closer and closer. And

then suddenly, in an unconscious move, I am drawn towards the desperate and mysterious calls. I force myself to break away from the vending machine and walk to the left. It seems I am caught in a spell, a hypnosis while I could not believe my ears. *No way, it can't be...*

No, never in my wildest dreams I would have foreseen this situation from happening. Really, to say I was surprised would be the understatement of the century. Today, on this particular Saturday evening, standing near a beautiful park at dusk, I spotted them. Teamed up and all, side by side, screaming passionately and desperately. Unbelievable, but they did. Calling my name, searching for me, looking around and walking in circles. They really did. Sukuyo-san and Satsuki did. *Sis.*

My feet started moving on their own and my legs followed suit. Towards the two, and towards what would be one hell of an encounter. *I've got to talk to her, tell her what I really want us to be. I'm coming, Satsuki-nee-san.*

Satsuki's POV:

With each scream, with each shout and with each time these same words escaped my lips, my heart becomes more desperate. I don't know about Sukuyo-san, but her facial expression is slowly transforming into a more grim one. It's getting darker and darker, and no success has yet been achieved. Even the park is visible once again, meaning we were basically running in circles. Well, to be honest, I haven't paid attention to our location at all, and I don't think Sukuyo-san did either.

"Ryūko!" I try for the millionth time, my voice starting to get hoarse and dry.

Sukuyo-san starts coughing. Her throat is probably just as dehydrated as mine. Although her body language reads exhaustion

and gloom, she did not give up. A deep inhalation. "R-RYUUUKOOO-CHAN!"

The traffic rushed past us, but it did not matter to me. Not at all.

"... nee-san? Sukuyo-san?"

Huh? In a flash of recognition, I do a complete 180 degrees, leaving myself dizzy and disoriented. Am I seeing things? My head is spinning. I rub my eyes once, twice, thrice. The picture stays the same. No, I can't believe it. It's really her. She came back.

"... Ryūko." I uttered softly. Upon hearing me, Sukuyo turned around as well, her eyes widening in shock and surprise. She couldn't believe it either and her body kind of froze on the spot. In the meantime, my little sister and I exchange silent whispers.

We have a lot to talk about.

Alone Together Part 1

Chapter 17 - Alone Together Part 1

A/N:

A million times sorry for the long delay! I've been really busy with my bachelor thesis, as well as the preparations for the summer school I'm planning to go to. What a paperwork! Anyway, here's chapter seventeen!

It was quite difficult to come over this barrier I set for myself with the previous chapter. The confrontation between Satsuki and Ryūko was inevitable, but then again, I don't want to rush the story because of my own writing struggles. Soooo, I tried to follow my imagination as much as possible without swaying from the original storyline. Review if you want, of course! That always makes me happy ;)

"Mhmmm...." The humming was followed by a loud groan and a full body shift, causing a certain brunette to end up face down in the grass. This uneasy position she held out for a couple minutes, still asleep and softly snoring while the drool continued drooping down her face. Eventually her breathing became sufficiently obstructed to let her sit up in desperate need of air.

A sharp inhale. "Ehhh?!"

A quick look-around. "Ehhh?!"

She was alone, utterly alone. The sun had hidden herself behind the tall buildings of Honnō, leaving the girl in semi-darkness and in a surrounding that had become increasingly cold to the touch. Frantically, out-of-breath and desperate, she searched and looked around for any nearby human life. She was met with nothingness

and silence, though. *Where did everyone go? Minna, where are you?*

"Mama?" Her breath hitched. "Papa?" She turned a full 180. "Ryūko-chan?" Tears started filling her eyes. "Satsuki-sama?" Her gaze darted to the grass. "Guts?"

Drip.

Drip.

One by one the tears fell down her face, streaming down her cheeks and leaving her skin at her softly rounded jawline. She sniffed, blinked and balled her fists in defeat.

Where did everyone go?

Ryūko's POV:

"... Ryūko." My sister's voice sounds beyond tired. Is that concern I hear? Well, that sucks. I mean, that's the one thing I don't deserve. *Concern. Pity. Kindness. Attention. Love.* Not after what I did. Not after what I caused. Not after I ran away.

In the corner of my eye I see Sukuyo-san frozen on the spot, seemly shocked about my sudden appearance. And to be honest, even I'm surprised I got so far. That I managed to end up right back at the park is something I'll never come to understand. Really. *Faith must have wanted me to be here again...*

Screw that. I wanted to be here, and talk to her.

I eye the two of them cautiously. For a second, I wanted to walk over to Sukuyo-san and shake her out of her daze. However, that would be just me running away as well. And that's not what I came here for, period. That wouldn't be fair to the other person standing before me,

whose body language screams to be heard, to be understood and to be forgiven.

Yep, unfinished business. My talk with Tsumugu was the trigger to realize this, but I cannot deny my own desire to talk to with Sats. It must be the determination running in our family, giving me the limitless drive to push forward. *Our family.* " If you want to build a close sisterly bond, that's a thing you must be prepared to do." His honest speech of repeats itself in my head, letting the cruciality of each spoken word resonate and amplify. Questions keep popping up. How do I see our future together? What do I want to...

Nope. I've made up my mind 'bout that. Ya completely right, punky.
Suddenly, I feel a little lighter.

Then, I glance over at her. *Nee-san.* Her blue irises speak a million words, but she herself had become quiet. As if she's on-edge, waiting for a sign, for something. *Oh, right.* What a fool I am, standing here, dumbfounded. I realize she's expecting me to speak up, answer her. A wave of nervousness almost caused me to drown in my turmoil. *Man up.*

I can't keep my hands still, and subconsciously they went deep in the pockets of my jeans. Maybe it looks uncaring or nonchalant, for all I care. *Everything better than seeing me shaking like a leaf.*

"S-Satsuki-nee-san." *Damn me and my stuttering mouth. Keep your act together, Ryūko.*

Our eyes met again before mine started roaming around. To the floor, to the sky, to the rushing cars, to the traffic lights. Green. Orange. Red. In the meantime, my mind went blank. Then I shut my eyes. *Heck, I'm really bad with these things.*

And suddenly, out of the blue but not that surprising, our saviour of the century comes flying in with fearless determination. "Ryūko, we definitely need to talk. Now." Her intense gaze bores into mine. *Thanks for saying that. We should, really.*

She tries reaching for my right arm, the one limb closest to her, and she succeeds. With a firm but protecting grip she held me, proceeding steadily to turn our two bodies towards the park. Although it was a completely useless thought at that moment, I felt safe and secure. *And strangely at home.*

However, Sats and I did not step out of the scene before calling out to Sukuyo-san. Said woman had not moved an inch since I arrived here, and probably had not been able to follow our short and majorly silent conversation. I wondered if she had blinked some time, or if all life was literally sucked out of her frail body. Anyway, we had no choice but to do something 'bout her.

"Sukuyo-san!" I shout, hoping to initiate some reacting from the person I view as family. She twitches and blinks a couple times. Then it went silent again. That is, for two seconds. A shrill but oh-so familiarly gentle voice resurfaced in her typical dramatic fashion. "RYUUUKOOO-CHAN! You're BACK! Thank KAMI-SAMA, you're BACK!"

I chuckle, amused by Sukuyo-san's antics. *So typical.* Laughter filled the air. And to my shock, it wasn't mine alone. Sats was just as fascinated and relieved as me, it seems. Fighting back the tension by laughing away the - *I don't know, dreaded* - conversation that has yet to come. The well-blended sound made my heart flutter, and an even broader smile crept onto my face.

For a moment, it was all roses and happiness surrounding us three. Sukuyo-san's face, however, unexpectedly turned quite serious amidst the lifted spirit. She deadpanned: "Dears, don't worry 'bout me or the rest... just don't be home too late, Ryūko-chan. And Satsuki-chan as well."

She winked and waved, flashing her sweetest smile. And, as if she was never there in the first place, she disappeared into the park before we did. It was weird, seeing that human-like statue - or statue-like human - suddenly alive and well, moving as fast as an enthusiastic Mako. And that is always a sight to behold.

For the umpteenth time, my sister and I look each other square in the eye. *Let's go.*

Satsuki's POV:

I have Ryūko tightly secured. She can't run away, even if she secretly has the intention to do so. Frankly, I am not entirely sure that is a thought capable of crossing my sister's mind at the moment. Her doe-like eyes and trembling figure says it all. I know. The guilt, the uneasiness, the reluctance. I have experienced it before. Regardless, she's here now, with me.

That single thought gives me enough fuel to continue this walk. We had stepped into the park, and followed the wriggly path that maneuvers through the shimmering landscape. And as we force our feet to move, thousands of sentences flood my brains. About what to say, what to do. What's best at this moment. What's the right decision in order to mend the wounds that we put on ourselves.

I ponder. But then again, I end it rather anticlimactically, if I say so myself. For some farfetched reason, I'd managed to spout nonsense. Nevertheless, I tried. So hard.

"So... " *That's really a great to start off. Not.*

Nonsense it really is, honestly. I then hear some shuffling beside me. Still, I can't bear to look sideways. My muscles tense up, and I fear that she must have felt it as well. *Let bygones be bygones. Say what you want to say.*

"... sorry, nee-san. I-I'm... really sorry."

Nee-san? My head snaps up, turning towards the sound. Longingly, I guess. But even more so, surprised and shocked. *Wasn't I the one who should apologize? I'm the one blabbering my mouth, saying too much, assuming things and going too fast. It's all my fault.*

Back to reality, I take in Ryūko's expression: beet red and looking everywhere but in my direction. Ashamed and embarrassed and guilty. My heart clenches and thuds in my chest, not liking this kind of emotion coming from my sister. *She deserves so much more...* Once I regain my senses completely, I retort quickly. "No, Ryūko. That's not necessary."

She flinches. A fraction of second of later she slumps, her energy draining from her body and figurative clouds hanging above her depressed figure. Meanwhile, I am perplexed, not understanding the sudden change in behaviour. *Oh.* Suddenly, I have my moment of realization.

"No, I mean..." *I am so frustrated with myself.* And I feel it all. She really couldn't stop shaking.

"GODDAMMIT!" I shut my eyes, not expecting that one word rolling off my own lips. *I am so frustrated with myself.* Then, defeated, I sigh. *That's right. Take a deep breath, Satsuki.*

A chill breeze I felt through my hair. It's starting to become increasingly colder, I notice.

Silence. "No, I mean... what I meant was... I should be sorry. And I am sorry."

I was met with more silence. "I started off the wrong foot. Always being this " gesturing between us two "awkward, not knowing how to begin a friendly conversation."

Another sigh.

"If I did anything to upset you, disappoint or even infuriate you... just know that this was never my intention. NEVER. What I want us to have..."

I swallow, pushing down a feeling of reticence. Her arm I still hold tightly to my side, never breaking contact. Our physical closeness,

for all that is worth. Eye contact was something entirely different, though, as Ryūko had begun to gaze downwards. Blushing crazily, adorably.

I brace myself. *There I go. Out with it.*

"... is a family to confide in. We... the two of us being closer, less awkward."

It was a short but covering message. Now if only... if only she would understand. I glance to my right, to my sister. To Ryūko. She finally stopped shaking, *thank kami*. As to reassure her, convince her of my honesty, I slightly squeeze her biceps. Meanwhile, I only have eyes for her alone. Curious, but especially anxious of her response.

Various what-ifs occupy my mind. What if she does not want us to be close? What if she was disappointed, upset or angry at me? What if she was saturated by the Mankanshoku's attention and welcoming attitude, not needing nor seeking mine? It's driving me insane, making me assume the worst upon hearing nothing but nothing.

And I fear the worst. *I am frustrated with myself. Over and over again.*

Ryūko's POV:

"We... two of us being closer, less awkward." My sister spoke the words carefully, slightly dragging her speech for some unknown reason. I don't understand, though. She does not have to be afraid or reluctant. I am totally agreeing, if not more eager to build a familiar relationship.

To be honest, her awkwardness just shows how much she is willing to become closer. I do not mind at all, as I am just as freaked out sometimes. *Always*. And I'm relieved by the fact she clearly wants us to become more sister-like. Not this midway crap we've been putting

up with recently. I feel her squeezing my right arm, and that encourages this one thought even further.

Real sisters, is this how it feels like?

For the first time since forever, I look up. Immediately, I get lost in the dark blue irises that are nee-san's. Sincerity sparkles from her eyes, her face silently shouting for attention and confirmation. And that makes me aware of my own shell-shocked state. *Shit.*

However, my lips were locked. Shut tight, not allowing a change for me to say it back. *Me too, nee-san. Definitely.* Instead of words, I went for the physical approach. By giving her arm a gentle squeeze, I hope to return the gesture from earlier, as well as the message that came with it.

Reassurance.

I give her a smile. She smiles back.

Love.

Alone Together Part 2

Chapter 18 - Alone Together Part 2

A/N:

To Doramile: Thanks for the feedback, and glad you keep up with my story! I must admit, I also think my attention has gradually shifted more towards Satsuki's struggles, and not so much the things Ryūko has been through. But fret not, I have some things planned to cover the gap I left in my storyline, so that it will be nicely wrapped up in my final chapters. I like to keep the story dynamic as well (sooooo I appreciate the wake-up call ;))...

Thank you all for the likes and reviews. With my newfound inspiration I decided to write another chapter, so here I go!

"So... nee-san, huh?" The older girl looked bemused, fascinated even, upon realizing the nickname change. She cocked one of her prominent eyebrow, viewing her sister on her left. As on cue, said bluenette started reddening even further, and tightly clung to her side in response.

"S-shut up... and... deal with it. I can call you names whatever I want, 'cuz I don't care." With a huff, she stuck her head to the side.

They were still walking in the park, the wind now growing uncomfortably cold. It was time for them to head back, but neither of them had made preparations to do so. Unfinished businesses, as the talk was not over yet. Not all wounds have been tended to. *Not that everything will be fixed in a blink of an eye. That is simply not possible.*

Fortunately, time was given to them, and nobody was going anywhere. Especially not now, as the two of them spilled the beans,

the encompassing words still fresh in their minds. The confrontation and the events from this afternoon still lingering in their memories. The soothing conversations, the advice, their determination. It all was still within reach.

"Not that I complain though." came the honest reply. That shut up the younger rebellion for a couple seconds, not really sure how to proceed this lightening conversation. *Again, not that I complain.* For a fraction of a second, she dared to look up, staring right into the eyes of her observing companion.

"... good, good." is all she managed to sputter awkwardly. Satsuki took a deep breath, letting this moment sink in. The ambiance and mood turned out for the better after her confession. Still, she was bothered by things. *A couple of things, actually.* Clearing her throat in her characteristically dignified way, she turned towards Ryūko without her arms loosening grip.

Blue met blue, and their now somewhat serious expressions face each other. She blinked.

Sigh.

"Ryūko, let me get this straight for a second."

She swallowed her apprehension away, blinking again.

"Were you bothered by what I said during our earlier conversation?" She pointed to the east, the direction from which they were coming. "The vending machine, I mean."

She slightly tilted her head, genuinely curious about the girl's answer. "Were you angry, upset... or was it due to something else?"

"..."

"Why did you run away, Ryūko?"

It was now that she missed the comfort of her sister's arm. Strange, really, how quickly she adjusted to the warm and protecting aura that surrounded Satsuki. One moment, they were screaming their heads off, fighting each other, running away and barely able to conversate, and the next moment they could not leave their self-made snuggly bubble. *Why did I run away?* For Ryūko, personally, this topic she hoped to avoid all together, but seeing her sister this dead-set and fierce and curious, she could not refuse her honest questioning.

Must have been the spur of the moment.

"It... it reminded me of something."

Satsuki listened intently. Ryūko, on her account, was embarrassed and therefore blushed madly, all while staring at some random spot on the ground. She could not bear to look up.

A mumble followed. "... and it sounds freakin' stupid, now that I think about it."

Satsuki's POV:

I could not resist the question, although I knew it must have sounded harsh or patronizing. *"Reminded you of what?" I'm simply wondering what you're thinking, Ryūko. It does not make sense. Of all things... why would that be the reason for leaving me behind?*

The silence that followed was deafening, but I did not want to break this tension. It was not welcoming, on the contrary. Then again, I absolutely don't want to neglect the loose ends. Doing that would probably mean we have to start from square one all over again as soon as something goes amiss. And I want to have some foundation to build on, some basis. Something we have obtained already through hardships and persistence. *We came from far, very far.*

In the meantime, I eye my sister's movements. She does not flinch nor shake, which I consider a tremendous improvement. I'm still

waiting for her answer, though. And while I'm patient and willing to stay quiet a while longer, each breeze and rustle makes me jumpy and on-edge.

The long-awaited answer. It came with a hushed and frustrated whisper. "I snapped, okay? It made me remember the reason for NOT having any scars on my body. Physically. The reason I've probably been alone my whole life, and why will always be different from everyone else."

I see that she balled her fists, nails digging into the palms of her strong hands. *Strong?* The cogs begin turning in my head. No, that has been the one wrong assumption from the beginning.

I mean, has she suffered less than me? No. Definitely not. More? Debatable, but I'd say so.

Is she scarred? No. She said so herself.

Yes. She is, mentally, her enhanced physique covering her physical ones. Her façade she kept brilliantly, putting away all doubts about her mental strength. She is always her grumpy somewhat tsundere but adorable self, never swaying from that front she build to protect herself. No wonder everyone seems to think that she's fine. *I do as well. Did, actually.* Now I see this is not the case.

One by one, the pieces fit into the puzzle I had not yet managed to solve. She has gained a wonderful family with the Mankanshoku's, a worthy substitute for the doomed lineage that is the Kiryūin's.

But what has she lost?

Her father? Her home? Senketsu? Her normal, human life?

What a fool you are, Satsuki. And a bad sister on top of that. No words can describe how I feel right now. I've never been defeated this excessively in my entire life. That is probably why I have not

been able to spout a sentence to the dear girl next to me. *She deserves so much more...*

I bring her closer to my body, and engulf her small yet strong frame in my arms. Embracing myself in her warmth, and allowing my feelings to flow over.

Must have been the spur of the moment.

Ryūko's POV:

The moment my head was buried in the crook of her neck, it seems as if someone put a warm blanket around me. The heat radiating from our bodies was welcoming, inviting, especially now that the chilly night started to make its entrance. *Not that the cold bothered me anyway.*

I like this better, though. Way better.

I cannot fight the resistance to snuggle into the embrace, gripping the back of her fancy shirt. The homely feeling resurfaces once more, and my heartbeat slows down in relaxation with each passing second. Because I realized something. *She understands. Nee-san understands.* The worries, the sleepless night, nights of missing Senketsu, of thinking about the whole Fiber-crap. *She knows, she really does understand.* A blush creeps onto my face, tightening the grip. *Thank kami.*

After Mother's death, I was in the slumps. And no, it definitely wasn't because of her. *The bitch.* No, Senketsu was gone, and my whole life had turned upside down. Dad was not the man I thought he was. I've been lonely because of him, but he was still my Dad. My only family. And then, one day, he was killed because of weird magic scissors. *I mean, what the hell?*

It couldn't get any worse, I thought. Well, I was wrong.

At some point I discovered I have - *had* - an evil and insanely madwoman as a Mother, that seemed to like experimenting on a fucking baby - *me* - to uphold the legacy of some extraterrestrial species. Yep, it turned out I am not even human at all. I even DIED for a moment before those Life Fibers took reign over my body! *Basically, I became a monster by the hands of another monster. Like Mother, like daughter.* I don't know how I fought the urge to puke when she pulled out my glittering and abnormally beating heart. Life Fibers and human organs intertwined. It was a horrible sight to behold, and a memory undeniably etched in my mind.

Oh, and I have a long-lost sister, to put the cherry on top of the already crazy cake. She was no other than Satsuki Kiryūin, the girl I dreaded and immensely hated and wanted to fucking die already. And believe, I tried my best to let that happen.

My head had been full, overflowing and unable to process all that was thrown to my face. As luck would have it - and I seemed to suddenly possess a tiny bit of it - the Mankanshoku's pulled me through the whole ordeal. It was not much, but they provided a roof and a floor to sleep on. Mysterious yet delicious food. The coziness and incomprehensibility of their family dynamics. It was more than enough. They helped me out of this deep and dark place and gave me a place to call home. But despite their efforts, a part of my mind stayed behind, lingering. *I will never be the same again. The old Ryūko is gone.*

You know, there exist only two persons who were able to tear down my walls. One being Mako, the tiny goofball and probably the best friend I'll ever have in my entire life. Her happiness is contagious, and somehow always manages to cheer me up. Though she lives by the day and can hold her concentration for approximately two seconds, she can be dead serious sometimes. And in those moments she listens to me, concerned yet overly positive and opportunistic, while providing ridiculous advices that, again, manage to make me laugh and cheer me up. And I'm not even starting on those speeches of hers...

The other one person seemly able to penetrate my soul is Sukuyo-san. No offense to Bazaro-san and Matarō - *cough, the perverts* - but she was the one that makes me feel at home the most. Her gentleness and motherly side grew onto me over the months, I guess. She is capable of reading my mind and mood with a single look at my face. And her cooking... simply heavenly.

Now, the next person I'll add to this list is Satsuki Kiryūin. *Nee-san*. She proved it this afternoon, with her consoling gestures. Her eyes said it all, that she understood. But honestly? I was not expecting anything, as I did not voice my own concerns to her at all. I never do. I never initiate. I mean, that's what I used to do with Senketsu, and no one else. After that? No replacements. No Mako. No Sukuyo-san. No Satsuki. *Am I a bad sister because of that? Probably, yes.*

I know I'm not an open person, and I'll never be one. The Mankanshoku's did not seem to be bothered by this fact when taking me in. Sats was a whole other story. Blame the awkwardness, her curiosity, my combustibility, our desperation. Anyway, it did not go so smoothly at first, and the bumps in the road have not yet disappeared completely. But she's making progress. And I'm grateful for that.

Guess I'll try to open up a bit more...

We've stayed in each other's arms for a couple minutes. *Thank you, nee-san*. And then, I let a tear slip. As I sigh contently, I taste the unfamiliar saltiness. I don't know what came over me after that, because I softly patted her back repeatedly and slowly. *Why tough? No clue.*

Somehow, that simple gesture struck a nerve in my sister, now that I feel the heart-wrenching sobs wrack through her body. She's clinging to me, her strong arms tightening the embrace to steady herself. Hearing the continuous stream of apologies and consoling words, a strange mixture altogether, makes me feel giddy inside. *You don't have to be sorry. I'm fine now, I guess.*

Nee-san never cries in front of anyone. The Jakuzure kid slipped this info a while ago. So, I'll be the only witness today, and the one person who is allowed to see her tears. More like, hear her tears, but still. Right now, I feel so very humble.

That's when I cried along, responding her words with the same amount of sorry's and don't cry's. Letting our emotions pour out freely, without constraint. Together. Just like Tsumugu said.

It just happened, really. *Must have been the spur of the moment.*

But we needed it. So much. *Honestly.*

And so I let my walls crumple down...

Home Again

Chapter 19 - Home Again

A/N:

Finally! Now that I'm back from China, I have some time to spare which is why I decided to make another chapter for this fic. My apologies for the delay, I've been busy my summer school and the graduation from my bachelor study in Chemical Engineering. As that has been all left behind and completed and all, I can work again to finish this story (yay)! Soooo, to Jojobubler: this is NOT the end, I'll be back with future chapters!

And, as always, thanks for the likes and reviews!

A click.

The usual "I'm home!" was now followed by a soft "shitsurei shimasu". As fast as lightning, the brown-haired woman tried to peer around the corner. *Is that...? No, I can't believe it!* She was not able to stretch her upper body till she got a crystal clear vision, though, as the image remained blurry and vague. That made her decide to switch tactics. Clearing her throat, she tried a cheerful "Ryūko-chan? Is that you dear?"

To be frank, she was worried sick for the girls. Sukuyo had managed to pick up her own daughter, who had been crying miserably and utterly alone in the park. From the incoherent string of words that had left the sobbing brunette in between the hick-ups and drooling and blubbering, she could decipher the story to some extent. It seemed that her husband and son were up to some sort of mischief, thereby completely having forgotten the important task she had given them. She had sighed, feeling a tad bit disappointed in the two. *Then again, as long as she is safe...* Her mother instinct had

kicked in, and she immediately comforted Mako with a big hug, softly stroking her hair. After a few minutes of consolation, she had dragged her home and prepared a nice and delicious yet incomprehensible dinner for her.

Still, her thoughts kept wandering to the two blue-haired girls. *Ryūko-chan. Satsuki-chan. My girls.* She knew they have a lot to talk about, but she also wished it could turn out for the better. This time, it should all work out for a chance. And honestly, she could not imagine a reason why this heart-to-heart would take a turn for the worse. *Why can't they see that they need each other?*

They are so alike, in that sense...

Lost in thought, she almost didn't register an actual answer coming her way. Sukuyo perked up, shifting her attention to the hoarse voice in the hallway. She listened intently, curiously.

"Yeah, it's me. Got nee-san with me, is that okay?"

Yep, it was unmistakably Ryūko. *I figured. My two men would probably glibber back home via the back entrance.* Knowing that the intruders were the long-awaited sisters, a heartfelt smile crept on her face. *Those two... finally...* She sighed, feeling relieved and happy and incredibly amazed all together. With a thud, she steadied herself, sprang in order to stand on her two legs and skipped towards the door, turning around the sight-blocking corner.

"No probs at all... I'm glad you both are here!" She paused for a second, taking in the sight of the bluenettes standing side by side. *Finally...* "Welcome home, my dear girls." And her already radiant smile widened even further.

Flashback:

The muffled sounds gradually died down, as did the display of emotions.

A sigh. It was followed by a few seconds of silence.

Some rustling. The crisping of fabric was heard briefly, before two pair of limps were hung relaxingly to their sides. One of them moved to a more familiar position, crossing them, giving of an aura of haughtiness. It could have bothered the younger girl. *Could have.*

No, she knew better. The older sister had put up her front again, and slipped on her facial mask full of mysteries. Like she has always done. It is her habit, an act of unconscious self-protection. Her nature, her quirk. *Something purely belonging to nee-san.*

That's why it didn't matter to her. *Not at all.* She, and she alone, had gotten permission to look past her walls of defense. And that gift had been the source of her never-stopping fluttering feelings, which hadn't died down ever since.

'Cuz she is special. To me. And I am to her.

So many words were spoken, yet many words were left unsaid. Both must have realized this, but still they enjoyed the warm embrace they have thrown themselves into. However, it was the younger sister who eventually voiced the one question that was brooding in her mind.

"So... what do we do now, nee-san?"

Said girl remained silent, leaving the question lingering in the air for a while. It was not as if she was not able to give an answer right away. Not at all, on the contrary...

She knew exactly what she wanted to say. Though, admittedly, expressing her intention in an adequate way was a whole other story. Then again, it was something that must be done. For the sake of their future.

Meanwhile, the sound of night crickets filled the chill summer air...

Satsuki's POV:

"Soooo... you girls talked it out with each other?"

Within a fraction of a second, I snap out from my daydreaming state. *Where am I again?* I take in my surroundings. Shabby, cheap furniture spread across a furthermore scarcely interiorized living room. A squared wooden table, Eastern styled, accompanied by thin cushions to sit on. In fact, I am sitting on one of them, on my knees, my hands politely folded in my lap. *Ah, of course.* It occurred to me suddenly, that I am in the Mankanshoku's house. *Ryūko's home.*

From the corner of my eye I see my sister sitting on a similar red-coloured cushion. Her legs are clumsily crossed, definitely feeling more comfortable than me. Not that I'm nervous, just slightly more guarded, I guess. And for a good reason...

Right in front of me, effectively blocking my view now, is Sukuyo-san. Her questioning gaze bores into my consciousness. *Wait, what? Why?* Of course. She did ask me a question, after all.

Suddenly feeling very glared at from both sides, I cough softly, clearing my throat with one hand covering my mouth. I decide to look the woman square in the eye, and I see her visibly shrinking because of that. *Ah, not again.*

Am I that scary?

"Yes, we did." I confirm with a hundred percent certainty. *For sure.* "All is good..."

It was my turn to look at Ryūko at that very moment. The second our eyes met, both pairs started glistering, and our faces split into two smiles that reached from ear to ear. And I reckon Sukuyo-san was grinning as well, judging from the content sighs that reached my ears.

My sister's irises spoke a thousand words, basically sending the same messages she had given me half an hour ago. I brace myself.

Satsuki, out with it.

"Well, what we basically decided is..."

Ryūko's POV:

"... to keep this living arrangement for now, and meet up more often."

I keep listening, intently. Curious on how nee-san will summarize our conversation from earlier, I stretch my muscles to sit more upright. Although I already know, I still want to know more. How does she explain this to Sukuyo-san? And how will she react? What if...?

What if she does not want me anymore? What if they don't want me anymore?

Somewhere inside, a tiny voice tells me not to spout such nonsense. *That's just freaking ridiculous. As if they would do that.* I mean, they are basically the embodiment of welcoming and inviting. If not downright embracing, accepting and overly protective, even. Still, everything is possible. *It could go the other, oh-so wrong, way.*

Just like a waking call to my train of thoughts, nee-san continues her elaboration, her words as sure and determined as ever. "I figured Ryūko belongs to your family now, as well as she belongs to mine. And I cannot bear to take her away from you."

Gulp. It has become serious business now.

"Either way, we decided to meet up at least once per week for lunch and dinner. I mean, if that is alright with you of course." Nee-san suddenly looks in my direction, shifting her attention from Sukuyo-

san to me. Looking for reassurance, all while being questioning, doubtful.

I am not able to do anything but nod slowly. Giving Sats the final push, she turns her head towards Sukuyo-san. She stresses the question again. "Is this alright with you, Sukuyo-san?"

With my heart full of curiosity and tension, I too turns myself towards the person sitting on the other side of the table. The person I view as my newfound but not newest-found family.

What if they don't want me anymore?

I silently pray for the opposite to happen. But my feelings are mixed.

'Cuz now I have someone to fall back to.

How is that even a question? The middle-aged woman blinks a couple times, not believing the words she just heard. *How could they?* Her gaze she redirected to her own legs and feet, chaotically spread underneath her torso. She sighed, albeit not in acceptance and full of contentment, but filled with frustration.

How could they?

How could they think like this?

How could they even question this?

Still wondering and dubbing on the reason why the girls posed this question, she shot her eyes up to glare at the elder of the two. And no, she refused to let her eyes fill with tears. *Man up, Sukuyo!*

Gulping away the lump in her throat, she mustered enough force to slam her right hand onto the wooden table. It effectively sent vibrations through the shaky furniture, causing the younger sibling to flinch slightly. *Right, that's how they should feel.* Satsuki seemed

unfazed, but that could just be her imagination. She was good at hiding things. *Yep, that's what I figured.*

"YA!" She didn't realize she was yelling until she heard the unfamiliar sound leaving her throat.

A sigh. And while inhaling deeply, she sought the much-needed calming effect. It helped somewhat, but she could not avoid slipping out a few accusations. "You two... you idiots."

Now it was Satsuki's turn to be surprised. The brunette could see the chance in her behaviour, from the widened eyes to the swift in sitting position. *You cannot fool me.*

She continued, but not without letting out another sigh. "I am very disappointed in you two."

While crossing her arms, she started rambling. "How could you even think of deciding on your own? On deciding that we maybe will not take you back? Baka!"

"But..." It was a futile retort.

"How did you even get the idea in your head that we don't view you as family? You're so precious to us. You both are." And as on cue, the tears started flooding from her eyes.

And that's that! I'll be back with a new chapter as soon as possible!

How To Proceed

Chapter 20 - How To Proceed

A/N:

And I'm back again! It took me a bit longer than two weeks, but I finally managed to make a decent chapter, which kinda wraps up part of the storylines I set out for this fanfic. Now that the story is nearing its end, I'll come back with an 'epilogue', and then it will be done!

Please, feedback is much appreciated. I'm really wondering what you, readers, think of my very first fanfiction, and if there are things I should keep in mind for future fics. But then again, don't feel obliged to leave a comment! As always, hope you enjoy the read!

Ryūko's POV:

"How did you even get the idea in your head that we don't view you as family? You're so precious to us. You both are." As soon as I hear the fierce yet shaky voice of Sukuyo-san, I fear the worst. *Oh no, don't you dare.* My eyes shoot towards her, and I realize my premonition is quite close to the truth. Yep, it's close to the frightening reality.

Don't you dare go crying on me. We don't fucking deserve it, Sukuyo-san.

But the waterworks started flowing anyway, as if she didn't hear my silent pleas for a truce. For a peaceful conversation. And I still don't understand the sudden burst of surprise and disappointment and sadness. She acts as if the world came crashing down on her, as if we asked things that shouldn't be asked.

Then again, we really aren't her biological family. Though it sounded so logical to me, to us.

I exchange a look with nee-san, and see that her eyes speak the same language. Emitting the same words that kept wandering in my head. Yeah, I'm damn sure. She is just as confused as I am. Taking a slight bit of pity on Sukuyo-san, I nod reservedly as to assure my sister. Then, I turn back to face Sukuyo-san. In the meantime, during our short silent conversation, she had started muffling her sobs by placing both of her hands on her face. The hiccups were irregular, and the sound of her sniffing up both drool and snot was audible. *Ewh.*

"Uhm, Sukuyo-san." *Shit.* I hesitated. "P-Please, stop crying." And I stuttered. Great.

It seems as if she hadn't really heard me. She just kept crying continuously. Dramatically, and very much hysterically. I hate to admit it, but it kinda broke my heart to see her like that. The truth and sincerity of her previous words came back hitting me at full force. *We, precious?* It was something I could not fathom, I could not wrap my head around it. I mean, Dad was never one to express his emotions on the scarce days he was actually at home.

And our own blood-related Mother did not even have that word in her vocabulary. And even if she had, it was not destined to be used for us. Maybe, just maybe, she would use it because of our usefulness for the Life Fibers, but never because we're her daughters. Yuck. It's too disheartening to even think about.

But that's the sad reality. One that I've already accepted a long time ago. And I bet nee-san did that as well... a long way before I did. That's something I definitely can imagine, even though she can be headstrong and persevering. *I mean, she had to live with that bitch since forever. She had to experience her wrath tenfold, if not more. That crazy lunatic.* I cringe. I shiver, shutting my eyes.

Suddenly, I come to the realization that, at this very moment, I miss Senketsu terribly. I desperately long to have him near. He would have been the one to vent my concerns to. My talking buddy, despite the fact I'm not keen on babbling and rambling and chit-chatting. But still, I wonder. What would he think of this situation? How would he handle this all? Would he reprimand me for my stupidity? Would he think I acted correctly?

What would he think of my reconciliation with Sats? *Would he be happy for me?*

I for sure hope so.

Wait, wait. Back to the real world. 'Cuz Sukuyo-san is still crying. She'd not recovered from her blubbering mess during my silence. And that's a serious problem that needs and screams to be fixed. The hiccups and sniffs became worse over the course of my two daydreaming minutes. *Oh no.* It's going down the oh-so wrong way.

Softly, without making too much noise, I scoop over to her. As swiftly as possible. All with the intention to stop this as soon as possible. Really, I can't bear to see this sight. I linger for a second, contemplating on how to proceed. *Shall I...?* My arms, that had begun to reach for her shoulder, stagnated in the air. They proceeded, however, after my mental preparation had completed.

Their final destination, Sukuyo-san's left shoulder, I reached while bridging the last inches with extreme caution. That made the woman shut up for a moment, her breath stuck in her throat and her eyes darting to my slightly shaking form. I gulp, suddenly feeling very conscious of her pleading yet disappointed eyes landing on me.

I steady myself, with both my body and mind. Clearing my throat, I look her square in the eyes, with confidence seemly matching Sats'. *Good thing she's not capable of reading my mind...*

"We don't deserve your tears, Sukuyo-san. Nee-san and I, we... are very grateful you think of us this way." I quickly glance over to Sats,

who encourages me with her dazzling smile. I continue. "You are precious to us as well."

Another second of silence. "You're like the mother we never had."

That's it. I said it. I turn towards Sukuyo-san. And to my surprise, I was met with her shell-shocked state. The silent tears keeps running down her cheeks. But they seem a bit happier now.

The lack of conversation was deafening while three of the four women present in the house went through different stages of shock, curiosity and anxiousness. As for the middle-aged brunette, she went from her frozen state to being a crying ball of misery. That lasted for a couple of seconds, however, as the words of Ryūko dawned on her. The meaning brought a smile to her face, which caused the woman to cry and laugh at the same time. Happy tears were flowing like a waterfall, and she redirected her loving gaze from the one girl to the other.

She was overjoyed, and at loss for words. *What you girls do to me...*

Meanwhile, Ryūko was mostly anxious. The bluenette had said something completely unlike her. So out of character. Yet, she could not help it. *She was so dejected, so... vulnerable.* The words escaped her lips before she knew it, leaving her worriedly awaiting Sukuyo's response. She fiddles with her jacket, with the leathery fabric she was wearing. Secretly the younger sister kept stealing glances at the older woman.

Will she keep providing me a home to stay in? Is she happy to hear my words?

Lastly, Satsuki was very much curious at scene unfolding before her eyes. On the hand, she felt for her sister. Ryūko laid her heart open and vulnerable for Sukuyo, who had yet to give any response to her confession. And it was not as if she didn't agree with her. *Sukuyo-san is indeed the one loving and responsible guardian, no, mother*

figure we both never had in our lives. On the other hand, she was greatly fascinated by the display of emotions on Sukuyo's face. In her mind she secretly compares it to a rollercoaster, with her up- and down-going mood.

She kept wondering. *What will she do? How will Ryūko react?*

How do we proceed? The hearty and teary laughter gradually dies down, until it is truly silent. That is, until the brown-haired woman decides to speak up. And while Ryūko and Satsuki have their gazes pointed to their own legs, their senses are on-edge, trying to pick up every sound and shuffle from the person sitting across them. They want to hear everything. Every. Single. Word.

"Y-you two are like daughters to me as well! Like I said, you're so precious to me and to the whole Mankanshoku family..." She coughs a bit, swallowing before continuing. "And of course you can stay with us, Ryūko-chan! You are part of the family now!"

Now it was the younger girl's turn to remain suspiciously silent. She was not able to hide her happiness from her face, though. While still looking down, her expression brightened drastically. She now wiggles on her seat in a sudden burst of positivity and energy. Satsuki eyes her contently. *I am so happy for you, little sister.*

The older sister observes the redness on Ryūko's face becoming more and more apparent. *Such a cute blush. And such a cute sister.* Her gaze she now directed to Sukuyo-san, to her teary smile and kind and loving aura. The things that had been occurring here, at this very moment, were strange yet encouraging to her. It seems like they were paving a path towards a fruitful future. Full of love and family.

It was something to look forward to.

And that realization brought a genuine and intensely radiant smile on Satsuki's face.

I'm so glad I've been able to meet you, Ryūko.

And now I have a place to call home.

"RYUUUUUUUUUUUKOOOOO-CHAAANNNN!" The recognizable high-pitched tone of Mako resonates through the living room. The sound reached the two sisters earlier than the sight of her flying body. One that crashed down the table, tackling her mother on her way to the wooden object. Upon seeing that she mistargeted her attack, she shifted her body a full 180 degrees to come eye-to-eye with the intended landing pillow.

Take two. Three superfast blinks, and a swift movement towards the bluenette. That startled the already flabbergasted girl, who had been busy amicably chatting with her sister and Sukuyo about their future. A future they will experience together, as a family.

"RYUUUKOO-CHAN, you listening? Say, did you and Satsuki-sama make up?"

"..." This mere millisecond of silence made Mako incredibly impatient. *I wanna know. RIGHT NOW.*

"Ne, ne, Ryūko-chan? Did you say what you wanted to say to your sis? Is everything okay now?"

It was at the point where Mako started shaking Ryūko's shoulder with her usual enthusiasm that Satsuki decided to step in. "Yes, Mankan... I mean, Mako-... san. We are alright now."

Surprised by the chance of honorifics, Ryūko snapped out of her shocked state. She started grinning a bit because of Satsuki's antics. *Still not used to talking informally, huh?* She shifted her gaze from her sister to Mako, her sister figure. Her friend for life. Her family. She answered. "Yup, we're totally fine now!"

And to illustrate her words, she stood, walked over to the other bluenette, plopped down, and draped her arm over her right shoulder. Though she managed to keep her poker face, Satsuki was stunned by her sister's action. It took all of her power to not flinch away or shift over to a defensive stance. *Sorry, it's just my automatic response. I cannot switch that off with one flick of my fingers.* Instead, she tried a smile. Tried.

Ryūko saw a flash of anxiousness in her sister's blue irises, which made her back off slightly. Not before giving the girl a gentle squeeze, though, as to say a silent 'sorry for startling you'. And that gesture did convince Satsuki to forgive the younger girl. *I know, it's just you and your impulsiveness. So for this one time, I will forgive you.*

However, secretly she feared the inevitable has happened. Ryūko had already conquered a soft spot in her heart. She would probably get away with this more than once.

That's what sisters are for, isn't it?

Mako, in the meantime, had her eyes set on the sisterly pair. She glanced back and forth, and although no word had been exchanged, she knew enough. The two of them finally found each other. *Finally, really.* She began smiling, heartily laughing, and skipped a few spots over to her mother.

She whispered softly, as not to disturb Satsuki and Ryūko. "They are soooooo the same... don't you think, mama?" Her hand she put on the table, and her shoulders she stretched a bit. She had slept for a few hours, after all.

Mako looked up to meet the brown eyes of her mother. Sukuyo, on her part, could not agree more. And that is what she worded as well. Truthfully. "Those two girls are really alike, yes." She smiled, and then added. "Not really the same, but really alike. Just how sisters are supposed to be." Then a playful wink followed. "But let's not

break the news to them, shall we?" She put her finger on her lips, as to make a secret pact with her daughter.

Mako returned the gesture, giggling a bit upon mimicking her mother. That made Ryūko and Satsuki turn to the mother-daughter pair, who switched to their totally not-suspicious innocent faces in a fraction of a second. Cough. Cough.

They will probably discover it themselves. After all, my girls have limitless time to do so.

Time that we'll spend together.

The end.

Epilogue

Epilogue

A/N:

Last but not the least, the promised epilogue. It consists of two snippets in the aftermath of chapter 1 till 20 (wait, how many?). It happened. I wrote too much. ~guilty~

Anyway, as usual, hope you enjoy your read! Especially since this is the final chapter ;)

E.1 Not fair

"Hey, nee-san."

"Hmm." The older sister hums in response as to let the other know that she's listening.

"You know, I'm often reminded of our fighting days..."

Ryūko sighs, leaning back in her seat. Two hot cups of tea, which were neatly distributed on the mahogany table, leave a particularly flavoured scent. She smells flowers, leaves. A tiny bit of lavender. The mix of spices and dried botany that Satsuki holds dear. *Still too bitter for my taste, though.*

Her gaze is far, far away. Reminiscing on the past while looking through the window, failing to see the curious stare Satsuki is giving.

After a moment of silence, she continues. "... by other people, I mean. Though I'm willing to leave it all behind, start anew, they can't seem to mind their own fuck-"

"Language, Ryūko." The recipient deadpans, crossing her arms.

"-ing business." A frustrated sigh. She turns her head towards Satsuki, her eyes shooting daggers. Similar to her older sister, she went and crossed her arms.

Silence.

It was suddenly and harshly interrupted. "Aaargh, nee-san! You... don't you start shit-talking me too, I'm so sick of this!" Agitatedly, she then unties her arms and runs her fingers through her shoulder-length hair.

"Too?"

Another sigh. "My classmates are acting ridiculous. Thinking I'm still a brute, a monster. They keep avoiding me like crazy, like... like they're afraid. All while cowardly snickering behind me and Mako's backs..."

"So, is this about you fearing to become an outcast?" Satsuki shifts, leaning forward. Secretly, she knew that could not be the answer. *We have always been taught to stand on our own, after all.*

She mumbles. "No, yuck. That would be ridiculous. You know well me enough." The youngest let out a dry and empty laugh.

"I know, I know." Satsuki is still searching for some reassuring eye contact. Ryūko's irises were directed everywhere but on Satsuki's pools of ocean blue, though. *Nope, it's not happening today. Oh well...* "Let me take a good educated guess this time... is it about your complex?"

Silence. "Which is...?"

"You distancing yourself from the outside world because of the Life Fibers that keep you alive. In other words... the fact that you're not 100% human. And that they keep reminding you of that."

That put a nail on the head. Her eyes widen, then dart downwards, in defeat and in realization. *There was at least a tiny bit of truth in that.* With Satsuki observing her sister closely, she could not miss the depressed air coming off her. The chance in expression, in body language. *Was I too direct?*

The answer came soon enough. "Jeez, I'm well aware of that!"

"..."

"It's just... why involve Mako in this as well? It's not like she's done all that stuff."

"..."

"Isn't that right, nee-san?"

The question made Satsuki perk up. *She's unsure about all this? Really? Well, then it's time for a chance of tactics.* At least, the straight-haired girl is keen for some prying. So she will, of course.

"Nee-san?" Ryūko uttered and repeated the endearment questioningly. *There we go.*

"Hmmm, you're completely right." She nods, thereby excessively and almost overly acknowledging the truth in Ryūko's words.

The sudden and unexpected response made the latter a bit cautious. She could see the dramatic gesture from the corner of her eyes, after all. "Right... right..." Then she starts stealing some real glances in Satsuki's direction.

"..." In the meantime, Satsuki continued nodding, having her arms crossed. That is, until Ryūko ran out of patience. *What's this one-sided conversation?*

"So?"

"Well... that's not up to me, I suppose. It's your hurdle to overcome, not mine."

"But..." A futile retort. One which didn't go unnoticed by Satsuki. A mischievous glint started sparkling in her eyes. She dared to go a step further.

"But?" And her haughty tone was back. One which Ryūko hadn't heard in months. *Damn you, Sats.* To add some more to the fuel, she cocked one of her prominent eyebrows, visibly challenging her now. *That's it.*

"... it would not hurt to give me some support." Her soft voice was coated with a droopy air.

It was that moment when the older sister saw an opportunity. And she grabbed it with both hands. "So, you want your nee-san to beat up the bad guys?" A knowing smirk appeared on her face.

"NO!" A pause. "N-no, I mean..."

"..."

"T-That's not necessary at all! I can handle myself just fine."

"..."

"I know you know... so stop teasing me, nee-san. It's not fair."

"..."

"No, it's not fair at all."

"..."

"Nee-san?"

It suddenly occurred to Satsuki. Quite randomly, really. *How lucky I am, to be able to enjoy my free time like this. With my family, in*

peace and quiet. Teasing and rambling all the way. I wouldn't want to miss it for a thing. Slowly yet steadily, a happy smile crept onto her face.

"-ing, okay?"

She woke up from her daydreaming daze. "Hmmm, what did you say?"

"J-Just don't do anything. It's no big deal, really." Ryūko scoffed. Maybe she was dismissive because of Satsuki's lack of response. Maybe she was just feeling nostalgic, depressed, looking back on her dark past. *Our dark past.* Regardless, the older girl could not tell.

"Well, if you say so... then I'll refrain from minding your business."

"Yea, you should."

"But still... Ryūko." She called out to her.

"Yes?"

"You should put some trust in yourself, some more positivity. And fret not about those Life Fibers."

"..."

"If I'm being honest with you, the fact that you have changed for the better shows you are human." The girls look each other straight in the eyes. "The fact that you care proves you are human... and well, most importantly, you're my dear sister. Isn't that enough prove already?"

"W-wha-"

"So, it's alright. It's going to be alright, Ryūko."

"..."

The silence was deafening, yet strangely calming. The smile Satsuki wore mirrored the one that covered Ryūko's face.

"Thanks, nee-san. You're the best."

And those smiles grew even wider.

E.2 Sleep over

"Hey, nee-san?"

"Yes?" A familiar brusque yet gentle voice is heard from the other side of the line. It fills Ryūko with a comfortable warmth.

"Wanna come over sometime?" Silence occupies the air momentarily. The girl continues. "Actually, Mako keeps nagging about some kind of sleepover... so, you keen for that?"

"I think I'll pass, Ryūko."

The question was inevitable. "Why?"

"Sleepovers are not my cup of tea, if I say so myself."

"... have you ever tried before?" came the honest retort. Because Ryūko was seriously curious.

"You don't need to have experience to know yourself." She deadpans in a monotone voice. *Looks like she's bluffing her way out. No fucking way, Sats.*

"And you won't ever be pleasantly surprised if you don't try new things." Ryūko shot back.

"..."

"So?"

"Well, ouch." Another sarcastic comment was thrown Ryūko's way. "I must admit, you've become better at back-talking, dear sister of mine."

A triumphant grin appears on the younger girl's face. She puffs her chest upon hearing the compliment. Not that the other could see, though.

"Still, my answer stays the same."

And gone was the smile. Her stature deflates, sensing that Satsuki will not budge, never in a million years. *I mean, what should I even do to convince her?*

Nah, that's impossible. She's just as headstrong as me.

"..." Ryūko remains silent, mentally going through every option in the book.

That is, until her thought-process is forcefully interrupted by a shove directed at her ribcage. One which causes her to tumble sideways, leaving the phone to land in the hands of the culprit.

"Ne, Satsuki-chan?" The oh-so recognizably chirpy voice could be heard on the other side of the line. And that causes Satsuki to feel slightly awkward and surprised by the sudden change.

"M-Mako-san? Wha-"

"You **MUST** come to our sleepover this week, Satsuki-chan! You know, it's gonna be **SUPER DUPER** fun and cozy with us three!"

"..."

"And... and... Ryūko-chan is looking many-much forward to it! She does not tell you becau-" The sound of Mako's high-pitched rambling becomes muffled at that moment, not before the older girl hears some hushed 'sshhhhs' and 'shut-ups' being barked at the intruder.

A sharp breath she then hears, as if someone was gasping for some much-needed air. Out of curiosity, Satsuki kept listening intently. *What is going on over there?*

Some bonking, some rustling. More shuffling, shifting. Dead silence follows, all while Satsuki patiently awaits an answer. Which comes, surprisingly, from the original caller.

"Nee-san? Sorry for all this... Mako's been an pain in the -" One brief pause. A thud, accompanied by a droopy whine. "I mean, a... nuisance." she manages to squeeze out.

She continues. "I won't bother you again today... so it's time for goodbyes, I guess."

"Wait, Ryūko!" Satsuki exclaims. "Let me ask you one question."

"And what would that be?"

"Do you want me to come?"

"... yes." No hesitation at all. Fearless determination drips from this one word.

"Then, I shall have a sleepover with you."

"HELL YEA-"

"But..." She breathed in deeply. "... on one condition."

Nothing could stop Ryūko's enthusiasm and happiness at the moment. That's why she cannot contain herself and blurts out these three words confidently.

"You name it." *Anything for you, Sats.*

"Don't bother waking me up when I'm having nightmares, okay? They'll come and go, and I'm used to them. So leave me be, and

don't try to do anything."

"Oh sure, I'll definitely have them too. So the same holds for me, actually."

"..." *I figured as much.*

"But then we should tell Mako..." Another thud. *Poor Mako.* "... nah, never mind. We'll probably wake up from her snoring."

A childish giggle escapes Satsuki's mouth, one which she did not know she could muster.

"Is that so?"

"Ah, but nee-san..." says a contemplating Ryūko. "... what changed your decision?" *You're never one to back out like this.*

It's you, dummy. Only you.

She chooses to ignore the confronting question. With an "Until then", she hung up.